

Shifters'
CAPTIVE
— BONNIE DEE —

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Animal attraction is the essence of their power...

Magical Ménages, Book 1

Waitress Sherrie Stolz never thought she'd need her chatting-up skills to play along with a hot, sexy kidnapper who rants about were-animals and psychic possession. Then he proves his story by changing into a wolf before her eyes.

Human contact never interested John Walker, but his mission is desperate. The pack seer insists Sherrie is the only one who can save his people from a rash of mysterious comas. His connection with Sherrie is instant, powerful and beyond rational explanation. And then a third piece of the puzzle enters the picture.

Grant Perron follows his instincts only to find his prize in the hands of his rival. He's poised for battle—until he learns his panther shifter clan suffers the same fate as John's pack. But there's more. When the three of them touch, the primal, erotic power surge swells like the waves of an earthquake.

Sherrie's hands—and bed—are suddenly full, figuring out how to manage two snarling alpha males without giving in to the urge to knock their heads together. And channel her new-found power before a villain uses it to destroy them all...

Warning: Contains abduction, m/f/m ménage, oral & anal sex, rough sex, wilderness sex, astral projection sex and plain old sex in the bedroom—times three.

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Shifters' Captive

Bonnie Dee

Dedication

To Kate, who is my best cheerleader and critic.

Chapter One

The streetlight was out, the bulb broken and glass shards scattered on the sidewalk beneath. Her feet crunched over the glass then resumed tap-tapping along the cement. Sherrie listened hard as she walked, but no other footsteps echoed through the night air. No predators lurked in the shadows of the alley as she passed. She was alone on the street. So why did the hair rise on her nape and prickle on her arms? Why did her heart race and why was she walking faster and faster?

Sounds or no sounds, she felt the presence of something nearby. Someone hiding and watching and following her. Was this what a rabbit felt just before a predator's fangs bit its throat and sharp claws ripped out its life?

Almost home. Walk faster. Her front door key was clutched in her hand, ready to jam into the lock the moment she hit the stoop. Pepper spray dangled from the key chain, and she had her defensive moves ready from the class she'd taken at the Y. If anyone really did come at her from the darkness, she was prepared.

She turned the corner. The front door of her building was in sight only a half a block away. In five minutes, she'd be sitting on her couch, shoes off her aching feet and laughing at herself for being such a wuss. But from now on maybe she'd tell Carl she had to close the diner just a little earlier so she could catch the last bus home and not have to walk. One lone customer lingering over a refill of coffee was no reason for her to take risks with her safety.

No sounds. It's your imagination. And then the soft pad of running footsteps and the sound of panting breath came from behind her. Sherrie slipped her hand from the key to the pepper spray as she whirled to face her pursuer. Adrenaline shot through her system, waking every cell, and they all screamed, "Flight!" Blood pounded in her ears so she could hardly hear.

A flurry of movement. Something large and dark. A body barreling into her and a hand covering her nose and mouth with a cloth. She inhaled to scream, and a medicinal odor filled her sinus cavities. Her finger went down on the trigger, spraying pepper, and she smelled that too.

As she lost consciousness and slumped against the hard body holding her, the last thing she heard was a murmured, "I'm sorry," and, from somewhere close by, a dog's howl.

The low murmur of voices was a part of her dream then became real as she surfaced into consciousness. Why was she lying on the floor, and what had happened to the threadbare carpet that covered her apartment from wall to wall? In a flash, it all came back to her. She wasn't at home, passed out

after an evening of partying with her friends. She'd been attacked and kidnapped, taken off the street right in front of her apartment.

Sherrie started to open her eyes and stopped. Better to take it slow, find out as much as she could about her surroundings before anyone knew she was conscious. She'd learned a lot from reading suspense novels.

A quick mental check and she realized she wasn't tied up and that her key ring with the pepper spray was gone. She'd been left lying on the floor as if she weren't a threat. If her captor assumed she was powerless, it gave her a small advantage. She might be able to catch him unaware and escape.

"...all I can tell you. It's not right, damn it. I could've found a better way to do this if you'd given me some time." The deep voice vibrated, sending shivers down Sherrie's spine.

"There *is* no time. We needed to act immediately. We need this woman, and—"

"Sh." The man with the lower voice interrupted. "Go now. I'll deal with this."

There was the sound of footsteps, a door opening and closing then the floor creaking as the remaining man walked toward her. She drew a breath, bracing herself for whatever would happen and ready to take advantage of any opportunity to fight her way free.

He stood over her for so long that she thought she'd pass out from holding her breath.

"Miss Stoltz, I know you're awake. I can hear the difference in your breathing." His voice was so low and rumbling it sounded more like a growl than speech.

Sherrie wasn't ready to open her eyes and see the face of her attacker. He could never let her go after that. He'd have to kill her. So she spoke with her eyes squeezed shut.

"Listen. I don't know who you are and I don't care. I won't go to the police. Just let me go now before this gets any worse, okay?" She couldn't believe how calm and level her voice sounded when her body was trembling and her insides were liquid with fear.

"Miss Stoltz...Sherrie, I'm not going to hurt you. I'm sorry I took you the way I did, but there was no time to explain things which you'd have a hard time believing. The truth is you could be in danger, and I'm here to help you as well as my people."

My people? Was he some kind of crazy cult leader?

"You can help me by taking me home. Or don't take me home. Put me out on the street somewhere. I promise I have no idea where I'm at or who you are. I'll go on with my life and you go on with yours."

There was a long pause, and when the voice continued, it was closer, as if he'd squatted by her side. "I'm sorry. That's not going to happen."

His hand touched her shoulder, and Sherrie flinched. This was it. Whatever he was going to do to her was beginning now. Visions of all the possible tortures a serial killer could inflict on his victim before he killed her flashed in her mind. She'd seen too damn many detective movies and too many sequels to *Saw*.

“Please, open your eyes and sit up. I’ll get you a cup of tea or coffee or a bottle of water if you want—sorry, I don’t have any soda—then I’ll explain everything.”

Laced with what drug? Sherrie weighed the consequences and decided it didn’t much matter at this point whether she saw him or not. He wasn’t about to let her go. She cautiously lifted her eyelids and looked at the face of her fate.

Brown eyes with a golden cast gazed into hers. A frown drew his dark brows together. A ragged fringe of walnut brown hair fell over his forehead and grew in thick sideburns, framing his strong-boned face. His nose was long and straight, his mouth wide with thin lips pressed tightly together. He curved his lips into a smile, and white teeth showed between them.

He’s going to eat me up. Instead of filling her with terror, the thought precipitated an insane flare of arousal. Her body tingled as if hit by an electric charge. Her breasts were tender, nipples pebbled hard, and her pussy clenched as if he’d touched her there rather than merely looked at her. What the hell was wrong with her body?

“You’re safe. We mean you no harm.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” Sherrie thought of the man who’d left and wished she’d caught a glimpse of him too. From the conversation she’d overheard, it seemed this man might not have wanted to take her. Perhaps she could work on him and convince him to let her go.

He smiled wider, showing more gleaming teeth. “That’s all part of the story. Why don’t I make you more comfortable first? I’m sorry about the conditions here, but I didn’t know where else to bring you.”

He rose and walked away from her.

She eyed the distance to the door then his broad back as he opened the door of a mini-fridge and took out a bottle of water. How much time would it take to jump to her feet—or stagger because she still felt woozy—and run for the door? Despite his polite manner, she guessed the man would grab her before she could clear the doorway. Better to bide her time, listen to his story and let him think he could trust her.

Meanwhile, she glanced around her prison, a primitive cabin with a kitchenette, a couple of chairs, a futon against one wall and a wood burning stove. That was all the furnishings. There were two windows: a tiny one in the kitchen above the sink and another beside the door. Through it she saw tree branches and sunlight, indicating she’d been passed out for awhile.

“Here.”

She jumped. She hadn’t heard him approach her. He held out a water bottle. Sherrie took it, uncapping and guzzling the cool liquid that soothed her parched throat.

“My name is John Walker.” He held out his hand and she took it, struck by the ironic display of manners under the circumstances. His hand was cool from the water bottle and stayed wrapped around hers for a few seconds longer than necessary. An uncanny charge tingled through her body straight to erogenous zones, horrifying her with its inappropriateness.

Walker released her hand to sit on the floor beside her, his long legs folding gracefully beneath him. He regarded her as he sipped from his own bottle. "Sorry about putting you on the floor, but it actually seemed cleaner than the cot."

She didn't reply.

He drew an audible breath. "I've practiced what I was going to say to you, but no matter how I say it, I know it'll sound crazy."

Never antagonize a crazy man. Show him sympathy and trust. "I have an open mind and I'm listening. Go ahead."

"There are beings in this world that humans tell about in horror stories, but they're real—shapeshifters, people who transform from human to animal form. In movies they depict werewolves as killers, but in reality we hunt like any other wolf pack, roaming wild lands and catching game. The rest of the time we live and work alongside humans." He smiled, again showing that mouthful of teeth. "But we aren't human."

Sherrie nodded and frowned slightly to display her understanding and sympathy. She'd had a lot of practice making that expression. Some of the regulars at the diner spilled their woes to her every evening.

Her captor shook his head. "I can see you're never going to believe any of this without proof, but before I give you that, let me tell you why you're here. There's a sickness spreading among my people. A wisewoman in my pack divined that there's a particular woman who's the key to healing us."

"Me," Sherrie murmured, working hard to sound like she believed him.

"Yes. It's not clear whether you'll find the cure or if you yourself are the solution, but Anna saw you in a vision and told us where to find you."

He leaned toward her, piercing her with his gaze. "Once I saw you, I knew. I could smell it on you. I knew she was right and you're different—not quite human."

She felt a chill not caused by the cold water she'd drunk too fast. Her stomach rolled. Breathing in and out, she calmed her screaming mind before answering. "Perhaps you've got the wrong person. I don't have any kind of medical knowledge. I don't know how I could possibly be of any use to you or your, uh, people."

"It's not a normal illness. This is a psychic malady."

"Oh, well, I have no experience with that either. Maybe you need a priest or shaman or something." She was impressed by her capacity to spin bullshit under pressure. Her mother had been so wrong when she'd told her she'd never be a good actress. She may never have landed a role during her stint in L.A., but that didn't mean she didn't have some kick-ass talent.

Walker put his water bottle on the floor beside him. "All right. Here's your proof. It's clear we're not going to make any headway without it."

He rose to his feet and moved several yards away from her, which, in the small cabin, took him to the wall. He pulled his gray T-shirt over his head and threw it on the floor, kicked off his shoes, unfastened his jeans and pulled them down his hips. He was naked underneath, and his erect cock thrust before him, thick and dark.

Sherrie swallowed and clenched her water bottle. He was aroused by her fear. That was how sexual predators worked. He'd come for her now, try to rape her. All she had to bash him in the head with was this light bottle and a few karate chops barely remembered from a class taken nearly two years ago. Yet, despite her being paralyzed with terror, that same perverse shiver of erotic interest shot through her at the view of so much lean male muscle and taut skin.

As if guessing her fears, Walker paused. "I told you. I'm not going to hurt you. But you won't believe me without a demonstration, and I can't do this with my clothes on."

Sherrie stared at the crazy man standing before her and braced herself.

The change was so subtle at first she thought her eyes were watering and blinked. John Walker's face and body shimmered like an oasis mirage seen through desert heat. It was as if he were melting like candle wax, softening and liquefying. His face elongated, while his arms and legs lengthened and grew thinner. All of his proportions changed, and he went down on all fours. His hands and feet transformed into paws. Dark gray hair, or rather fur, sprouted everywhere, covering his skin. He grunted, but the only other sound was a wet squelching and a brittle noise like ice cracking as his muscles and bones reconfigured into a new shape.

Sherrie thought with spacey detachment. *That looks as if it hurts like hell.* But if her mind was calm, her body reacted on a more primitive level. She crab-scuttled backward across the floor while she screamed and screamed and screamed.

The woman's shrieking went on and on, piercing his head with its shrillness. He laid his ears back flat and curled his lips, baring his teeth to show his disapproval. He commanded her to stop with a growl, but that only made it worse.

She screamed again, threw her empty bottle at him and scrambled to her feet. Her wide gaze darted frantically around the tiny kitchen area. A couple of grocery bags sat on the counter. She picked up one and hurled it at him with better accuracy this time. The bag hit him in the head and knocked him backward. It fell to the floor, and canned goods and vegetables spilled out of it.

He leaped sideways and circled around, cutting off her route to the door. *Must keep her here.* His thought process worked differently when he was in this form, but he was still aware of his other half with all its needs and agendas. The woman was important, not like other humans, and she wasn't to be harmed, no humans ever were. He couldn't let her go. Not that she could outrun him even if she made it through the door.

Tongue lolling, he moved closer and breathed in her scent, rich with pheromones. Fear and sexuality oozed from her pores. His hackles rose and his cock did too. He wanted her, wanted to mount her, even though she wasn't one of his kind. Gathering strength in his haunches, he leaped up and landed with his paws against her shoulders and his muzzle on a level with her face.

She screamed, another knife-like wail that shredded his eardrums, and pushed against him. But his weight bore her down, dragging her to the floor with him on top of her. He wanted to fuck her, wanted her to turn over on all fours so he could bury himself deep inside her. He wanted to whine and bite her neck and come into her hard.

No. Not like this. The inner man pulled sharply on the leash connecting him to his primal ego. John Walker struggled back to the surface, gathering in the dark folds of his wolfish alter-ego and binding him. The body shifted again, painful to do it twice so quickly.

The man re-emerged, smooth-skinned, two-legged, so limited compared to his wolf strength and stamina. And still the woman beneath him screamed. She'd damage her vocal chords if she didn't stop soon.

"Sh. Sh," he soothed, his hands braced against her shoulders and his body pinning her flat. "I told you I won't hurt you. That's not what we're here for." But his aroused body made it hard for her to believe him.

Sherrie twisted and wiggled beneath him. His cock ached and strained into the cheap polyester waitress uniform covering her soft belly. He couldn't resist pushing, thrusting lightly with a rock of his hips.

John grunted and rolled off of her. "Sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"Hah!" She gave a sharp bark of laughter that sounded as harsh as her screams and began laughing hysterically. She sat up and drew her legs to her chest. "Don't know what came over you," she gasped through her laughter. "That's good."

He grabbed his jeans off the floor and thrust his legs into them, pushed his erection inside the fly and fastened it so fast he nearly caught his sac in the zipper.

"Sorry to scare you, but you'd never have believed me otherwise." He sat cross-legged, facing her. "I didn't do this lightly. I can count on one hand the number of humans I know who know about our existence. And I can count on one finger the number I've allowed to see me transform."

Her giggles abruptly cut off like water from a tap. "I'm honored," she said dryly. "Why me? Why did this happen to me?"

"I told you, you're chosen or marked in some way. Divined as being someone important to the shifter world."

She rested her elbows on her knees and covered her face with her hands. "Every kid daydreams about discovering they're magical or a super-hero, but this isn't the kind of fantasy I had. This is a nightmare."

“It doesn’t have to be.” John touched her foot, the only part within his reach. He didn’t know if he meant to be comforting or if he simply needed to make contact with her. He, who’d always been against shifters mixing with humans, was undeniably attracted to her, and when he was interested in a female, he had to touch. That was the way wolves demonstrated affection: a playful nip, a bump of shoulder, a muzzle rubbing their mate’s neck, broadcasting sexual or friendly intentions.

Sherrie pulled her foot away as if he’d scalded it. Her face jerked up from her cupped hands, and she glared at him. “What do you expect me to do? How long are you going to hold me here?”

“As long as it takes to figure out what your part is in this.”

“What if there is no part? What if it’s all a big mistake? Will you let me go after what I’ve seen or is this like the Mafia?”

He smiled. “No, I’m not gonna whack you and I will return you home after you’ve helped do whatever it is you’re supposed to do.” It was frustrating not to have a better answer. He’d like to know why he was holding her as much as she would. Was Anna really wise or was she going senile?

But no. This woman was unique, not quite human. He’d felt it much more strongly when he was wolf, but he could sense it now too. And his burning need to possess her refused to abate. It was a powerful yearning beyond his control and different from anything he’d ever felt.

John shook off his desire and rose. “I’m going to make you something to eat. I brought a box of supplies along, which you chucked at my head. You’ll feel a lot better with some food in you.”

She snorted. “You think I could eat anything right now?”

He turned away. He was going to cook anyway, to give himself something to do while he figured out what to do next. Besides, he was starving after expending so much energy shifting in just a few minutes’ time. His metabolism had devoured every scrap of his power, and the engine needed to be stoked.

“I understand your shock, and again I apologize for frightening you. Kidnapping you wasn’t my choice. I would’ve liked to introduce myself another way, let you get to know me first then reveal all this. But the others... Well, time is critical right now.”

She watched him warily as he picked up some apples and oranges that had rolled across the floor. “What about that other one you were talking to when I woke up? Who is he? Where did he go? And where are we? If you really don’t intend to hurt me then I have a right to know everything.”

“Fair enough.” He set the bag on the kitchen counter and began putting perishables into the small fridge. “His name is Brian Cox. He’s one of the pack elders, our governing council. He insisted on acting on Anna’s vision and bringing you here immediately. His youngest child is one of those stricken, lying in a coma.”

“Where is ‘here’?” Sherrie leaned against the counter, arms folded.

John wondered how much he should tell her. She was right in thinking they couldn't let her go back to her old life. Not knowing their secrets and not unless they could trust her. But what was the alternative? What would the pack decide, and would he stand against them if he didn't agree with their decision?

"We're in the mountains outside Boulder, so I haven't taken you far from home. The nearest town is Browning, and that's where most of the pack lives. It's the perfect location, since we have access to open land and an eco-friendly town where we can work."

"How nice. That sounds perfect for you." Her tone could've dehydrated a watermelon. "Tell me more about life as a...werewolf."

He closed the fridge door with his foot, holding several eggs in one hand and a package of bacon in the other. "Shapeshifter or just shifter. You conjure up images of Lon Chaney in bad makeup with the other. Besides, wolves are only one segment of the shifter population across the globe."

"Other people who turn into animals, all around us, all the time?" Sherrie pressed her folded arms tighter to her body, which forced the tops of her breasts to swell upward so her cleavage showed in the neckline of her dress.

John's flagging cock hardened again. He ignored it as he set a frying pan on the hot plate.

"Not as many as there used to be. Habitats are dwindling for us like they are for all animals, and it's hard to live our 'alternative lifestyle' in an urban environment."

"I'm sure the shifter squirrels and raccoons and rats do fine," she quipped.

He turned to look at her, impressed by her breezy attitude. "Not many people could adjust so quickly. You're a very strong person."

"No. This is me barely keeping it together. Inside, I'm running around screaming and crying, but where I grew up you learned to act tough or got your ass kicked."

"Where's that? I don't really know anything about you except your name and your current address." *And your delicious smell, which I could isolate blindfolded in a crowd of people.*

"I lived in Gary, Indiana a long time ago. Scrawny trees and brown grass. Not like here. I had a single mom and no dad or siblings. Followed my high school boyfriend to Hollywood where we were both going to be big stars. Five years and twice as many boyfriends later, I moved with an eco-zealot named Tom to Boulder. I thought Tom was better than the rest of the losers I'd picked, but he turned out to be just a different flavor of asshole. I can't believe I'm telling you all this! It's none of your business. I always blurt things out when I'm nervous."

"I'm glad to know something about you." *And glad you're beginning to trust me enough to share your story.* He laid strips of bacon in the pan, and they immediately began to sizzle.

"I'm the one who should be asking questions, like about how this whole shifting thing works. How did you get the way you are? Do you have super strength? Does it take a silver bullet to kill you?"

“Why? Do you want to kill me?” He smiled at her, but she didn’t smile back. He washed his hands and turned to face her, lounging against the counter as if he were relaxed when actually his system was sizzling like the bacon. Sherrie set his nerves on edge, woke up his very cells and made them vibrate with need.

“Okay. Shifting 101. We’re born this way, not made by a bite or anything. Like I told you, we’re not human, but a different species, even though we can easily pass for human. There are few cross-species matings. We generally stick with our own kind. We don’t have super powers or extra longevity and a rifle can kill us like it would any other animal. That’s why we have to be extremely careful where we hunt.”

“Why take animal form at all if it’s dangerous? I can see it doesn’t take the moon cycle to change you. If you control the change by your own willpower, why not always stay human?”

“Why do you have green eyes or brown hair?” he countered. “It’s what we are. To deny that aspect of ourselves is to not fully live. Like a dancer who’s crippled or a gay who’s afraid to leave the closet. Understand?” As he stared into her bright, sharp eyes, he wanted her to understand.

She nodded. “Yeah, I guess I get that.”

Another wave of that terrible yearning to have her washed over him. The feeling was nearly uncontrollable as if it came from outside himself. He wanted to grab her and drag her up against him, kiss her hard and then fuck her harder.

John bent to scoop his discarded shirt from the floor and put it on, shielding his burning skin from her roaming gaze. “Any more questions?”

“What do you do when you’re not prowling around the woods or kidnapping women?”

“I have a sporting goods shop in town.”

Sherrie laughed then clapped a hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry. It’s just so...surreal, so bizarre. You’re a real Clark Kent.”

“Except I never get to be Superman,” he reminded her. “I can run pretty fast as a wolf, but I can’t stop a city bus and lift it over my head.”

She smiled and her eyes crinkled at the corners. She had a dimple in each cheek that invited a kiss. “I’d like you, if you weren’t keeping me a prisoner.”

“I’m not. I mean, I am, but only for a short while. When the Council decides what to do, we’ll leave here. This cabin was just a place to go where I could break the news to you, ah, gently.”

“Real gentle, knocking me to the ground and slobbering into my face.” She rubbed her shoulder.

He noticed she didn’t mention his dry-humping her. “Sorry about that.”

Her dimples disappeared and a frown creased her brow. “What does it feel like? The change and being a...a wolf?”

John closed his eyes and inhaled as he tried to think of a way to describe it. The rich bacon smell tickled his nose and whet his appetite, but the subtler smell of the woman standing before him filled his senses and hunger raged through him.

“Like having a bandage ripped off and feeling air on a raw wound. Fully alive and painfully real.”

“Sounds awful.”

He shook his head and opened his eyes to look into hers again. “It’s the greatest pleasure I know.”

“Better than sex?” Her eyebrows shot up.

“Well...a different category of pleasure.”

“So, you and your people all live in this town and you only have sex with your own kind. Don’t you get a little inbred?”

He was amused by her open curiosity and ridiculously turned on every time she said the word sex.

“There are other packs living other places. Sometimes we have to search far away to find a mate. You’re right. It’s not as easy as going down to the local bar and picking up some girl for the night like humans do. Not when many of the women in town are your cousins.”

“Why not just do it with a human chick? I mean, the body parts fit together the same way, don’t they?”

“Yes. Some shifters do that for quick relief. I don’t choose to.”

He was starting to sweat and he stepped away from the hot plate. Her questions were making him think of things he didn’t need to be thinking about when his body was already so sensitized and ready to mate.

Food. Focus on food and getting it into her mouth so she’d stop talking.

“Why don’t you get some bread out? We can’t toast it, but we can have it with the bacon and eggs.”

Sherrie pulled slices of limp bread from the bag that was crushed from landing on the floor. “What about food? You don’t eat raw meat?”

“No.” He removed the bacon from the pan and broke the eggs into it in quick succession.

“But when you’re...in that other form, you eat rabbits and squirrels and mice?”

“Yes.” He had to step close to her to get a couple of chipped and dusty plates from the cupboard above her head. It was a mistake. When he inhaled the scent of her hair and her warm skin, fresh arousal surged through him.

John slapped the plates on the counter and the bacon and eggs onto the plates. He thrust one at her. “Here.”

“What’s the matter? Am I embarrassing you? Well, it could be worse. I could have knocked you unconscious and dragged you somewhere against your will.”

His patience and his control were at a breaking point.

“Go ahead and eat. I’ll be outside.” John stalked toward the door.

Bonnie Dee

“Are you mad? What do you have to be mad about?” she called after him.
He closed the door behind him before he did something they’d both regret.

Chapter Two

The moment she was alone, Sherrie searched the few kitchen cupboards and drawers for anything sharp she could use to protect herself. John Walker might appear to be a nice enough guy, but she wasn't taking chances—not when he had an alter-ego that made Cujo look like a pussycat. There wasn't one useful, sharp, pointy thing except an old can opener.

The smell of the bacon had her stomach twisting in knots. She hadn't eaten since before her shift started last night, and who knew how late the following day it was now. Sherrie piled the bacon and eggs on a piece of bread, folded it over and devoured the sandwich then she looked at Walker's untouched plate. If he was going to let it grow stone cold while he sulked outside, she'd polish it off for him. Gina Stoltz didn't raise her daughter to waste food.

She slowed down on the second meal, savoring the crisp bacon and salty eggs, and when she was finished, she burped and patted her contented stomach. Yet even though her hunger was appeased, she still felt empty, like there was something else she desperately needed. Maybe it was dessert.

Sherrie poked through the box of supplies and found a box of cookies. She took a couple and wandered around the cabin eating them while she looked for any escape route she may have overlooked. Four walls, a window and a door—both facing the direction where her captor was no doubt waiting. There weren't any possibilities there. She slapped a hand on the ragged quilt covering the futon and dust puffed up, making her sneeze.

Sherrie dropped into one of the chairs and stared at the tiny window that framed leafy green branches lit by the sun. The sound of Walker's footsteps pacing back and forth in front of the cabin was soft but audible. What was he so bent about? She hadn't insulted him, or not much, anyway. She got the impression he was attracted to her. Maybe it was the way he'd humped her when he was lying on top of her—that'd be a hint. At any rate, perhaps she could use it to her advantage. Playing him until he trusted her and let her escape was a damn sight easier than trying to fight her way free with a rusty can opener.

But could she seduce a man who wasn't really a man? And what if she manipulated him right into her pants? God, the thought of him turning while he was screwing her was horrifying. She suddenly realized she should be horrified by the thought of fucking him at all. He was her kidnapper! What was the matter with her that she was actually thinking about having sex with him and was pretty turned on by the idea?

Her skin was itchy and too hot. The feverish feeling had been present ever since she'd seen him naked. *What an incredibly fit body.* Sherrie rubbed her upper arms and tried to ignore the sensitivity in her nipples and the dull throbbing in her pussy. Sick, wrong and twisted, that's what it was.

Outside there was the musical sound of a cell phone ringing. She listened to Walker answer it. During the rhythmic murmur and silence of the conversation, he spoke with rising annoyance in his tone. She could tell the call was finished when he cursed loudly then the door opened and he filled the frame.

Sherrie resisted the urge to jump up from the chair and back away. He was intimidating, even if he didn't intend to hurt her. She met his gaze boldly.

"Who was that?"

"Cox wants me to bring you to his house. His daughter Liberty is one of those stricken with the sickness, and he wants to see if you can do anything for her."

Sherrie's pulse sped a little faster. A change of location might give her an opportunity to escape. "I doubt I can help, but sure, I'd be happy to go."

Walker shifted from one foot to the other, and the movement made her think of her mother's dog Buster when he'd done something wrong.

"I'm sorry. I have to blindfold you."

"Are you serious? I'm already in this so deep I know you won't just let me go afterward. What's the point in blindfolding?"

He shrugged. "Cox demands it."

"Do you do everything he tells you to, kidnap people and blindfold them? Seems like you'd be capable of making your own decisions."

"He's one of the leaders. When the Council decides, the rest of the group trusts their decisions. We're a pack, not a democracy. It's how we do things."

He walked toward her, and this time, Sherrie did step back a pace.

"Turn around, please." He lifted his hands with a folded piece of cloth stretched between them.

She obeyed his quiet command. The cloth smelled of motor oil and it tickled her face as he covered her eyes. The brush of his fingers in her hair as he tied it and his strong presence behind her sent another rush of perverse excitement through her, as if they were playing a bedroom game. What would it be like to be blindfolded and bound naked to a bed, completely at his mercy? She could imagine soft growls, stroking hands, a playful nip on her breast. Then he'd lunge, cover her with his hot body and give her a fucking like she'd never experienced before.

"Too tight?" he asked.

"N-no," she stammered. "That's fine."

He took her arm and led her outside. She felt the change in air, the ground beneath her feet, and the heat of the sun on her head. Being blind made her more aware of Walker than ever: the sound of his

breathing, the warmth of his hand on her arm, and his smell—no cologne or soap, just male scent wafting from his skin. But he wasn't a man, was he?

Images of him changing to a beast, which she'd managed to close out of her mind until now, suddenly flooded back in. The full realization hit her that this was not a dream, but her new reality. Creatures that were the stuff of nightmares lived on the Earth, side by side with humans.

"What about vampires?" she asked.

"Excuse me?" A car door opened, and Walker pressed his hand to her head, lowering it as he helped her inside. She smelled the mingled odors of old pizza and pine air freshener and felt him lean across her body to fasten her seat belt.

"Are there vampires too? Zombies? Goblins? Demons?"

"Re-animated dead people? Um, no, not that I'm aware of. And I think there's plenty of evil all around us without Satan unleashing demons on earth."

"So you believe in the devil and God?" she asked after he'd walked around the vehicle and slid into the driver's seat.

"I don't know what I believe in. Good and bad actions, sure. A code of ethics. Beyond that, your guess is as good as mine."

"So I can assume your code of ethics includes kidnapping?"

"This isn't a normal circumstance. You have a destiny in our world."

"What happens if the psychic is wrong and I'm no use whatsoever? Will your ethics tell you to let me go or shut me up?" It must have been the blindfold making her so bold and mouthy, as if it wasn't really her talking so she could say anything. Taunting the man who held her life in his hands certainly wasn't a smart thing to do.

There was a long pause before he replied. "I've told you no harm will come to you. You're safe with me."

Spoken in his gruff rumble, the words sent an excited thrill through her, another of those inappropriate reactions she'd been having. What the hell was making her respond to the sight, smell and sound of him like a sex-starved nympho?

"Whatever happens, I promise to deliver you home safely," he continued, "no matter what the Council advises."

The car jolted over rutted roads, and Sherrie could tell from the incline they were descending a steep slope. She stopped talking and tried to pay attention to how many times they turned and in which direction, because that's what people did in suspense novels. But at this point it didn't much matter if she could retrace the route to the cabin since she already knew who these people were, the name of their town and their dark secret.

The hum of the engine and the aftermath of adrenaline rush soon lulled her into a stupor from which she jerked awake only when the car stopped.

“Brian’s family isn’t very accepting of outsiders. Try to realize they’re frightened and worried about their daughter. It galls them to ask help from a human, so if anyone is rude or brusque, that’s why.”

She could’ve made some crack about the irony of her, the prisoner, needing to be sensitive about her persecutor’s feelings, but Sherrie held her tongue. “How old is the girl?”

“Nine, I think.”

“What kind of symptoms is she having?”

“You’ll see soon enough.” He got out of the car and came around to let her out. When he leaned across to unbuckle her seatbelt, his shoulder brushed against her tits. Her nipples went instantly erect at the contact as if he’d taken hold of them and twisted. She sucked in a sharp breath through her teeth and knew he’d heard her.

He took her hand and helped her out of the car before guiding her down a path—she felt and heard woodchips underfoot—and up a couple of steps. The door opened without him knocking or ringing a bell.

“Bring her in.”

She recognized the voice of the man who’d been in the cabin when she awoke. As they entered the house, she smelled cooking meat and heard voices arguing in another room.

“I’m taking the blindfold off, Brian. It’s ludicrous. If she’s going to help, there can’t be any secrets or mistrust. We have to let her into our lives.”

As Walker removed the cloth from her eyes, Sherrie blinked and looked around the foyer of the Coxes’ house. It was hardly a wolf den and could’ve been any middle class suburban home. Kids’ shoes and backpacks lay in one corner. The coat closet door was ajar, and inside she could see jackets hanging and sports equipment on the floor.

Brian Cox was a middle-aged, African-American man of medium height and build with permanent frown lines etched between his brows. As different as he was in appearance from John Walker, there was an odd similarity in his bearing when he cocked his head and gazed at her. From the way his nostrils flared, she got the impression he was inhaling her scent and assessing it. His frown deepened.

“This is supposed to be our healer? She doesn’t seem very special.” If he was in wolf form, his hackles would be raised and he’d be snarling. With a scornful twist of his lip, Cox turned and led them into the house.

An open plan living-dining-kitchen area filled the first floor. Two women stood by the stove with arms folded, watching as they passed. The younger of the two looked like she’d been recently crying, and Sherrie guessed she might be the sick girl’s mother. The older one could be a grandmother.

In the living room, a couple of teenage boys, one black and one white, were playing a video game on the TV. They paused the game to look at the stranger too. The silence and watchful eyes and lack of polite

introductions made Sherrie nervous and uncomfortable. She was here supposedly to help yet they acted like she'd caused the sickness.

As she and John followed Cox upstairs to the second floor, John whispered near her ear, "I told you, they don't much like strangers."

"What's your daughter's name?" Sherrie asked, determined to break the barrier. It was not for nothing she'd been a waitress most of her life. She'd had a lot of practice finessing difficult customers.

"Liberty." Cox stalked ahead of her along the hallway and paused before an open bedroom door.

Sherrie's already speeding heart pounded a little faster. She felt like she was about to see a scene from *The Exorcist*. What was wrong with the kid anyway? She was relieved when she followed her reluctant host into the room and saw a normal, sleeping child on the bed.

The girl's dark hair was braided tight, framing her small face. Her complexion was ash-gray. Sherrie could see her eyes moving behind the closed lids, watching the invisible dream world. Her breathing was shallow, her bird-chest rising and falling rapidly. An IV drip hung beside the bed, fluids running into the girl's arm.

"Does she have a fever?" Sherrie started to move toward her, and Cox blocked her way.

"Brian!" John's sharp bark made her jump. "Do you want her help or not? You're the one who insisted we bring her here."

The man backed up a pace to let Sherrie approach the bed.

"Her temperature's been hovering around one hundred and two. Only a little high." A woman's voice came from the doorway. Sherrie glanced over her shoulder to see the younger woman from the kitchen.

"One hundred and one is normal for us," Brian explained. "Our metabolism is different from humans. That's why we can never check into the emergency room when we're injured. We tend our own sick and wounded."

"How long has she been like this?" Sherrie asked, as if it would help her in making some kind of unqualified diagnosis.

"This is the tenth day. There've been a dozen other cases in the pack. The first took sick almost a month ago. He died last Saturday."

Sherrie moved to the edge of the bed and took the girl's still hand in hers. A jolt of pure energy shot through her, and she gasped. Images flashed in her mind so fast, jumbled and foreign, that she could hardly make sense of them.

Girl face-wolf face. Best friend. Playing dolls. Hunting. Night scents. Hunger. Prey. Pounce and chase. Running, running, running. Gone.

Mother-Father. Warm, safe, home. Brother. Anger-yelling. Bike broken.

Stranger. Black-eyes scary. Danger. Running, running, running.

"Are you all right?" Walker grabbed her arm.

She let go of Liberty's hand. "Yeah. Yes. She's really hot is all. It surprised me." What the hell had just happened? She'd never felt anything like the fragments of thought and memory pelting her like hail, and she knew without a doubt they weren't her own.

The little girl lying under the flowered quilt moaned and shifted. Her lips moved and her eyes continued to move rapidly beneath her closed lids.

Mrs. Cox hurried over to the bed. "Did you feel something?"

"N-no. I'm sorry, but I'm no healer. There's nothing I can do for her." Sherrie wasn't about to say she thought she'd tapped into the girl's mind. She could barely fathom the unbelievable experience and sure as hell didn't want to give false hope that she could solve anything for these people. Better to keep what had happened to herself.

"Please, will you lay your hands on her for a few minutes? Maybe your touch will wake her up. If Anna says there's something special about you, it must be true."

Sherrie had never felt so useless in her life. She knew her touch couldn't heal, but if it would help this woman feel better, she'd do it. Bracing herself for another influx of sensations, she clasped the child's hand again.

Again she was walloped by thoughts and visions not her own. Filtered through a child's mind, and a non-human child at that, the images reflected her good and bad experiences. She was mad at her brother for borrowing her bike. He was way too big to ride it. He'd broken it and Daddy hadn't had time to fix it yet. Suzanne's bike was cooler anyway. Maybe Liberty could use this as an excuse to get a new one.

As Sherrie sifted through the girl's consciousness, she skirted the memory of The Bad Man—a big, black cloud that overshadowed all other thoughts. But if there was a psychic component to the child's illness, it was rooted there, so at last Sherrie pulled back the veil and glimpsed the face of evil.

He wasn't human or shifter, but something else, a powerful entity which wanted even more power. He was siphoning off Liberty's energy even now while keeping her imprisoned in unconsciousness. What The Bad Man was doing to her mind hurt, and she couldn't tell her daddy so he could stop it.

Sherrie couldn't stand the overwhelming feelings anymore. She broke contact, setting Liberty's hand back on the bed and patting it gently, hoping no one noticed that her own hand trembled. She didn't want to tell these people what she'd felt, at least not until she'd sorted through the experience herself. Perhaps later she'd tell John, but not the Coxes, not now when she scarcely had words to describe what had happened.

"I'm sorry. Like I said, I can't help. I wish I could."

Why was this happening to her? She wasn't part of their world. Their savior should come from among them.

Mrs. Cox nodded. "Thank you for trying."

"There must be something or why would Anna have sent us for her?" Brian Cox glared at Sherrie as if she was holding back on purpose. Her cheeks burned.

"We'll figure it out," John said. "It might just take some time."

"Time is something we can't afford. Liberty is getting weaker every day."

Sherrie pressed her lips tight. She wasn't good at keeping secrets. If she could reveal anything that would help the child, she'd tell them. But she needed time to sort it all out. The experience was too strange and surreal—much like the rest of this crazy day. And if she told anyone about her experience, it would be John, because Cox made her too nervous.

"You'll stay for dinner." Mrs. Cox offered her hand to Sherrie. "I'm Lydia."

"Sherrie. Pleased to meet you."

Dinner with the Cox family was awkward and uncomfortable. She found it hard to make small talk when their little girl struggled for life upstairs, and Sherrie had been kidnapped, not invited. It had been easier to question John about what it meant to be a shifter than to ask banal, non-intrusive questions about the Coxes' lives. "What do you do for a living when you're not a wolf?" and "Do you enjoy hunting little animals?" didn't seem appropriate.

Their son R.J. and his friend Spud stared at her with curiosity for only a few minutes. Then they wolfed down their food with teenage unconcern for something not directly affecting their immediate interest, which was getting back to their video game.

Sherrie found herself talking faster and faster about her life, how she'd gone out to L.A. and ended up here in Colorado. Didn't they always tell a victim to make herself more personal and therefore harder to kill? Not that she believed John would kill her any longer. She'd spent only one very bizarre day in his company and yet felt a strange connection that assured her he was safe to trust.

Brian Cox with his constant glare she wasn't so sure about.

At last the meal was over, and they were free to go. Sherrie asked if she could help clean up, as if she was a proper guest and not a prisoner, but John said they should be leaving.

It was a relief to walk outdoors, without a blindfold this time, and get into the passenger seat of John's Blazer.

"I thought you'd drive a more eco-friendly vehicle," she said when he'd taken his place beside her.

"It takes something with a little more horsepower to make it up and down these mountain roads."

Sherrie stared out the window at the forest surrounding them. She imagined the people she'd met today in their wolf forms running through the wilderness as a hunting pack. Even though she'd seen John's transformation with her own eyes and felt his heavy, furry body on top of hers, it was hard to envision.

"Something happened when you touched Liberty, didn't it?" he said after several miles of silence.

She debated lying, but hated lying and sucked at it. "Yes. I saw... I'm not sure what. Nothing like that's ever happened to me before."

“Tell me.” His voice was both commanding and soothing, inviting her to unburden herself. Sherrie spilled everything; Liberty’s childish thoughts, the scary man and the way he was feeding off her energy while she lay unconscious.

“It was like I was inside her head. I could recall her memories and feel the sensations she’s felt.”

“A psychic connection. Strange. Tell me more about this man she saw.”

Having him accept her explanation without hesitation made Sherrie feel comforted and confident. She closed her eyes and tried to remember.

“I didn’t get an impression of his physical appearance. It was more like his essence and that was like a black hole sucking up energy, Liberty’s and others.”

“How does he do it? How does he choose his victims and get to them? Does he have a physical form somewhere or does he exist only on an astral plane?”

“How the hell should I know?” she snapped. It had been a long, exhausting day. Darkness was closing in around them and she wanted nothing more than to curl up in her seat and sleep.

“All right. We’ll try to figure it out in the morning.”

She appreciated that he backed off immediately and didn’t question why she hadn’t said anything to the Cox family.

When they arrived back at the cabin, John took a couple of sleeping bags from the back of the Blazer. Sherrie was surprised at how quickly night had fallen on the mountain. She was used to the city where there was always the glow of streetlights. Here, the stars barely lit the darkness, but John led the way as surefooted as if he could see the path in the pitch black.

“Sit down,” he ordered when they got inside. She was glad to sink onto one of the hard chairs and watch him move around the cabin. He lit a lantern and spread one of the sleeping bags over the dirty futon mattress.

“Are you cold?” he asked. “I don’t think the chimney on this woodstove’s ever been cleaned, but I could start a fire.”

She shook her head. “No. I just want to sleep now. But first, I need to take care of business.”

He escorted her outside and around to the back of the cabin then stood facing the other way while she peed. It was weird squatting in the dark, noisy with insects and strange rustlings in the undergrowth.

As she pulled up her underpants, she glanced at the broad back of her kidnapper, now ironically standing guard like a protector. How had her attitude toward him shifted so completely in a few hours? A lot of it had to do with seeing the state of that little girl and understanding these people had done what they felt they must to save her.

A loud rustling in the weeds made Sherrie shriek. It might be only a raccoon, but with images of wolves in her mind, she stumbled backward. She caught her heel on a rock or root and started to fall, arms pin wheeling to keep her balance.

Hard hands caught her. Walker hauled her upright.

"You all right?" His voice was near her ear, and she felt the vibration of it rumble through his chest into her back. His body was solid and warm behind her. Tangible energy crackled between them, and he continued to hold her after she'd regained her balance.

"Yeah. Good," she muttered and leaned into him. Lust pulsed through her with every heartbeat. She wanted him with a ferocious desire that was way outside the realm of normal. Her tiredness was gone. Every cell in her body vibrated with energy.

Like a marionette she turned on invisible strings to face him, pressed her hands against his chest and lifted her face. She couldn't see his features in the dark, just the gleam of his eyes and the dark silhouette of his head against the starry sky. But she heard the intake of his breath, rough and ragged, before his mouth covered hers in a long, breath-stealing kiss.

Wrong. So wrong, she thought, but her body insisted nothing had ever felt so right. She gripped his shirt front, remembering how the hard body underneath had looked naked. She wanted to feel his bare skin beneath her palms.

He pulled her tight against him, hands cupping her rear and lifting her nearly off her feet as he kissed her harder and deeper. His tongue plunged into her mouth, and his erection pressed into her belly, solid and thick.

He wants me. He wants me, her heart chanted joyously even while her mind scoffed, *He's male. Of course he does*.

Arms like steel bands bound her to him and then he did lift her off her feet, sweeping her up and carrying her toward the cabin. Sherrie wrapped an arm around his neck and rested against his chest. In the midst of this outrageous day and with the very person who'd kidnapped her, she felt more secure and protected than she'd ever felt in her life.

John turned the latch and kicked open the door hard enough that it bounced off the wall. He strode across the floor and laid her down on the futon. A musty smell permeated the protective layer of the sleeping bag, but Sherrie didn't care. She wouldn't have minded if he'd ripped her clothes off and taken her outdoors on the bare ground.

She unbuttoned her ugly polyester uniform and wiggled out of the dress, while kicking her flat-soled shoes off her feet. In the orange lantern-glow, the golden flecks in John's eyes glittered as he gazed at her body clad only in bra and panties. He sat beside her on the bed, his hip against hers, one leg on the floor, and traced a finger along the scalloped edge of her low-cut bra. Her breasts swelled and her nipples tightened at his light touch. It was good, but she didn't want him to be careful and take his time with her, not now.

Sherrie thrust her chest toward him and whined, a needy little sound that made his hooded gaze grow even darker. A hungry growl rumbled from his throat, and her skin prickled at the primitive sound. What insanity was she getting herself into? Could he be aroused without unleashing his inner beast?

But he didn't tear off her underwear with gnashing teeth like she'd pictured. He reached beneath her to unhook her bra and take it down her arms then grasped the flimsy bikini panties and slid them down her legs. She lay nude and trembling on the lumpy mattress and watched while he stripped off his own clothes, revealing his lean, taut body once more.

Her fingers clenched in the sleeping bag, bunching the material, and her hips lifted involuntarily, she wanted him inside her so badly. It was almost as if she was drugged, helpless to resist the onslaught of powerful lust. She'd always been a sensual woman with a healthy enjoyment of sex, but this was beyond normal desire. All her synapses felt fried with an overload of sensation, and absolutely nothing mattered but getting that big, hard cock inside her now!

John bent toward her throat and licked her pulse point. He moved his face down her body, between her breasts, over her belly to her throbbing cunt where he paused. She realized he was inhaling her scent. His eyes closed, long, dark lashes so sexy against his cheeks and his nostrils flared as he remained poised over her, smelling her like a dog. Or a wolf.

After a moment, his eyes opened and he crawled up her body to lie above her. He supported some of his weight on sinew-corded arms, but his groin settled into the cradle of her hips, and his cock pressed hard between the lips of her pussy.

Sherrie exhaled through parted lips and she lifted her knees on either side of him. For one second her reason resurfaced, and she panted, "Condom?"

"Human diseases aren't transmitted through shifters, so you're safe as long as you're on birth control." His voice was low and growly. "Even if you weren't, interbreeding is rare."

"Okay." She was already rubbing her sex against his hard length. She slid her hands down his smooth back to grab his tight ass, accepting the convenient answer at face value. If she wasn't so goddamn horny, maybe she'd question it, but right now she was operating on instinct and pure lust.

Reaching between their bodies, she took the thickness of his shaft, so strong and vibrant with life, into her hand and guided it to her wet, yearning entrance.

His breathing was ragged and it caught as he pushed into her with one strong, hard thrust that buried him deeply. He groaned, and his body quivered in her embrace. Sherrie closed her eyes and held her breath too, as she savored the sensation of fullness...and something more. There was an unearthly quality about the feeling of completion that came over her. It was as if she'd never had cock before, as if John's was the missing piece she'd been waiting for all her life.

The muscles of his ass flexed beneath her hands as he pulled out then filled her again. She lifted her knees even higher, wrapped her ankles around his thighs to pull him deeper, and dug her fingers into his hard buttocks.

He sank down onto her, pressing his body full length against hers, naked flesh to flesh, nuzzling his mouth against her neck and shoulder and making that soft growling noise in his throat. How she loved that animal sound. His chest was covered with dark hair that brushed against her flattened breasts, tickling her pebbled nipples and making her squirm beneath him. Ooh, he liked that, did he? Another groan let her know.

Sherrie let go of his ass and slid her hands up his back to his shoulders before plunging one hand into his hair. The strands slipped between her fingers as she gripped his skull, hard bone beneath feather-soft hair. For a second she flashed on how soft his fur had felt when she'd pushed away his wolf-shaped body. God, had that actually happened? It seemed like a dream now—yet not, because she swore she could feel the animal in him even now, a wildness barely restrained and releasing more with every plunge that filled her body.

Faster, harder, deeper, he fucked her. She thrust back as she begged aloud for more, “Go! Harder!” and “Yes, right there” when he rammed into a spot that sent pleasure spiking through her.

Again he growled. His mouth, which had been pressed open and damp against her shoulder, clamped down. His teeth bit hard enough to hurt, but not hard enough to break skin. The pain burst through her at the same moment as her climax, pain and pleasure twisting together, becoming one as she howled her release and writhed beneath him.

With one last thrust, John froze, and Sherrie felt the swell of his cock in the grip of her inner muscles, the gush of warmth as he came. She groaned and drew a long breath, her sweat-slicked body sticking to his. Wetness seeped out of her pussy to pool on the sleeping bag. It was messy and sexy and real.

As if waking from a pornographic dream, she became aware of what she'd done—had sex with a shape-changing stranger. She waited for alarm, guilt, horror and shame to flood her, but none of them showed. In fact, she still felt elated, flying high on endorphins and the blissful remnants of her climax. With a contented sigh, she loosened her grip on his shoulder and the fistful of his hair.

He kissed her where his teeth had scored her flesh and lifted his head to look into her eyes. “Okay?”

“Mm,” she acknowledged.

“Sorry about...” He dipped his chin, indicating her shoulder.

She shook her head. “No. It's good.” She grinned. “Really good. I've never felt anything quite like that. It was, uh, intense.”

A small smile played over his lips, but he didn't answer. Instead, he rolled off her and lay on his back beside her on the narrow futon. He stretched an arm over his head and stared at the rough-hewn boards of the ceiling.

Sherrie lay with a hand resting on her chest, feeling the pounding of her heart and listening to the breeze outside rattling the tree branches. Sweat evaporated from her skin, cooling her, but John's hot body pressed against her side. She rubbed the sore spot on the crook of her neck and shoulder where he'd bitten her—*Left his mark*—and glanced over at him.

"Is it always like that for, um, your people? I mean the biting and the intensity?"

"No. Not like this." He sucked his lower lip between his teeth and let it go. "This was something different."

I'll say. She rolled onto her side facing him and rested a hand on his chest, combing her fingers through the light pelt of hair. She tried to work up some shame for fucking her abductor but couldn't manage the least little bit. It had felt good and absolutely right.

"This entire day has been bizarre," she said. "I can't say I don't wish things could go back to normal, but I don't regret tonight."

He didn't reply, but the little smile played over his lips once more. Slipping his arm beneath her, he pulled her snug against him.

Sherrie rested her head on his chest and continued to rub little circles on his hairy belly. "Wish I could have this with you and not worry about the rest of it. I don't know how I'm supposed to help that little girl."

"We'll figure it out. Tomorrow you can tell me again everything you saw or felt when you bonded with Liberty. There have to be clues to the identity of this person or entity, and you must have some part to play or Anna wouldn't have seen you in her vision."

It was Sherrie's turn to remain silent. She didn't want to think any more. Warm and comfortable against John's side, she shut her worries and fears from her mind and allowed herself to rest. Within seconds she'd drifted away from the new world that contained werewolves and psychic warlocks and the most mind-blowing sex she'd ever experienced in her life into a deep sleep.

Chapter Three

John listened to Sherrie's breathing deepen. The warm puff of her breath tickled his chest, and her hand had stilled on his belly only inches away from his cock, which began to stiffen once more. What the hell was it about this woman that lit in him an inferno of desire? He'd never before felt anything like the hunger she roused in his blood and the crazy, fierce need to protect her and join with her.

The feelings surging through him bore an uncomfortable resemblance to the mate-claiming he'd heard about all his life. He'd pretty much believed it was a myth shifters made up. The whole soul-bonding thing seemed like nonsense to him. Males and females were physically attracted to each other. They fucked. They produced some offspring. End of story. Because he'd never felt an overwhelming magnetism toward any particular woman, it had been easy to scoff at what others claimed to experience.

But now... He stroked the soft skin of Sherrie's hand, touched one pink-painted fingernail. Sex with a human went against his personal beliefs, yet he wanted this particular human woman with an inhuman longing. He'd take her again right now if she were awake. But she slept peacefully and deeply so he didn't disturb her rest.

John couldn't lie still. He never required much sleep, and right now the night called to him. He carefully shifted Sherrie and slid out from beneath her sprawled arm and leg.

Rising from the bed, he covered her beautiful, naked body which looked so vulnerable. But the woman wasn't weak. She had an inner core of strength. Anyone who could quickly adjust her entire mind set to encompass the paranormal realm was strong and self-confident.

John stooped and kissed the curve of her shoulder rising above the top of the blanket he'd placed over her. She shifted and muttered. He resisted the urge to reach beneath the blanket and tease her to readiness again. The scent of her musk, of their combined essences, drew him like a magnet, but he forced himself to turn away.

He walked outside naked. His keen hearing caught the rustle of small animals in the undergrowth, a sound that would usually make him salivate. But he wasn't interested in hunting tonight. He would patrol the perimeter of the cabin and make sure it was secure. A niggling sense of danger at hand pulsed through his veins, making the hair at his nape rise.

As his adrenaline level rose, John released his primal self, allowing it out of the cage where it dwelt when his id was in control. His body began to shift, a grinding of bones and reshaping of muscles that twisted him into his other shape. It was painful, but such a familiar necessity that he never thought about

the pain—wouldn't have now if Sherrie hadn't mentioned it earlier. The process was simply a part of who he was, like his big feet or his tone-deaf singing voice. Soon it was over, leaving him panting and exhausted for only a few moments before his heightened senses kicked in.

The rustling in the grass was much louder. The piercing trill of tree frogs hurt his sensitive ears, and he whimpered. Lifting his muzzle, he breathed in. So many delicious smells to explore. Rabbit, squirrel and mouse trails zigzagged all over the forest floor, as clear to him as if they were laid out like blue laser lines. But he would not follow any of them tonight. There was something else out there he needed to investigate, something hiding in the dark. The threatening presence was uphill from the cabin, how far, he had no idea, but it drew him.

John padded silently over the rough terrain, tongue lolling, hackles raised and nose constantly scenting the ground. He could smell nothing out of the ordinary, earth and animal, pine needles and leaf mold, but the sense of a foreign presence on the mountain grew stronger as he loped along. He paused at a stream trickling from a fissure in the earth and drank deeply, lifted his dripping muzzle and gazed into the darkness.

The world looked different through animal eyes. Shapes and shadows were sharper and clearer, and their patterns spoke to him in a different way. The thing that was drawing him up the mountain was not a normal part of nature. It was foreign, beyond his comprehension—and evil. He had no idea how he knew all this but the impressions broke over him with the clarity of a sunrise. The being would have to be killed, taken down like a rabid animal before it spread its infection further.

He sensed he was still far from his goal, whatever it was, and Sherrie lay alone and unprotected in the cabin. He must get back to her. Intuition never steered him wrong so he listened to the inner voice that told him to go back, abruptly turning and trotting downhill.

Light glowed through the windows of the cabin in the hollow. Thinking about Sherrie naked on the futon made him pant and run faster. His cock hardened as he imagined mounting her. She'd be sleepy at first, but would quickly wake and respond as he rammed into her. Their joining would be rough, hard and fast and when it was over, he'd do it again, slowly and gently with more of his human mind engaged. He'd give her complete pleasure.

If she were a shifter, he'd stay in wolf form while he fucked her, but it was too much to expect a human woman to welcome him like this. Before he reached the cabin, he changed from his animal shape and was walking upright by the time he reached the steps. He could smell Sherrie's earthy musk before he pushed the door open—and something else. A stranger. Another male.

He threw open the door to see a naked man bending over the woman on the bed. *Cougar*, his senses identified, and John launched himself across the room at the cat-shifter. Grabbing hold of the taller man's shoulder, he spun him around and plowed a fist into his face. His head snapped to the side, but he quickly recovered and punched John in the gut, knocking the breath from him.

Sherrie screamed and jumped from the bed. John sucked in a painful breath and drove his shoulder into the blond man's abdomen, trying to knock him off balance. It was like ramming into a tree trunk.

The man cuffed John in the head with one big fist, sending him flying across the room. Pain shot through his shoulder as he hit the wall and slid down it. Shifting even as he fell, he became wolf again and ready to fight with tooth and claw. He sprang toward the panther, jaws open, intent on ripping him apart while he was in his vulnerable human form. Once the stranger shifted, he'd again be outmatched.

His attention was focused on the man before him, whose shape shimmered and began to change even as John lunged at him. Then, suddenly, the panther-shifter crumpled and fell to the floor.

Sherrie stood over him with a wooden chair clutched in her hands, her eyes wide and her bare breasts rising and falling as she gasped for breath.

John stopped his leap before it carried him over his opponent's prone body and into her. He nosed the fallen man, memorizing his scent, and considered tearing out his throat before he regained consciousness. But that would destroy the fragile truce between wolf and panther. It would be better to find out why the cat was down here in wolf territory and what he wanted with Sherrie.

John gathered his flagging energy and shifted into human form once more.

Chapter Four

Sherrie clung to the chair she'd cracked over the stranger's head and stared at his sprawled, naked body. She was shaking and her heart pounded so hard she felt light-headed. Two nights in a row of strange men accosting her was too much. Sick of being some kind of pawn in this bizarre new world she'd stumbled across, she was half tempted to bat John with the chair too, as he morphed into human form.

"Who is this guy? Another one of your pals? I saw him start to change."

"No. Not one of my clan. He's a panther shifter. I can smell the cat in him."

"Like a mountain lion?"

"Yes, but shifters are a lot bigger." John pulled the belt from his jeans and began to bind the man's hands behind his back. He'd reverted to human shape when Sherrie had knocked him down. "They're loners, not pack-oriented like us. They keep to their own territory in the mountains. We have different hunting needs, and the panthers interact with humans even less than we do."

"What's this one doing here? What does he want with me?"

"I don't know, but I intend to find out. Run out to the Blazer and bring me the rope you'll find in the back. We've got to get him tied up before he comes around."

Sherrie ran to obey, becoming aware of her nudity only when the night air chilled her body as she stepped outside of the cabin. The bizarreness of the entire situation struck her, and she fought back a burst of giddy laughter. If she started to giggle, she wouldn't stop until she'd broken down into tears and ended up curled in a fetal position on the ground, blubbing.

As she carried the rope back to John, she wondered how they could possibly keep their prisoner contained if he shifted again. Could mere cotton rope hold an angry cougar with claws and fangs?

John tied the man to one of the chairs—not the one Sherrie had hit him with, which was broken. She grabbed one of the chair legs, avoiding the splinters, and tore it off, intending to use it as a club if necessary. By the time John had finished binding the stranger, he was wrapped like a mummy and he was beginning to regain consciousness.

Sherrie put on her waitress uniform while keeping an eye on the blond stranger. He was basketball-star tall and muscled like a linebacker. It was a wonder he hadn't killed John with one swipe of his big hand. She couldn't help but notice the ridged muscles of his abdomen and his flaccid cock—uncircumcised like John's, large and framed against tawny hair. A surge of lust shot through her, and she tore her gaze away from his genitals.

After slipping on her shoes, she picked up her makeshift club. The panther-shifter's amber eyes opened and focused on her. They were almond shaped, giving him an Asian appearance at odds with his Nordic fairness. He stared at her until John punched him in the chest then his gaze narrowed and swung to the other man. A snarl curled his lips, and a growl rumbled through him.

Sherrie's skin prickled at the bestial sound, and her nipples tightened. As her thighs tensed, she was ashamed of her body's perverse reaction. Had she become some kind of thrill-seeker, turned on by dangerous strangers and edgy situations?

"Who the fuck are you and what are you doing here?" John demanded.

At first it seemed the prisoner wouldn't reply. He looked like he'd rather swallow broken glass than give John the satisfaction of an answer, but at last he snapped, "Here for the girl, just like you."

"How'd you know about her? Who sent you?" John leaned close, but not so close that the prisoner could hit him with an unexpected head butt.

"No one. Followed a dream."

"What?"

"You know what I'm talking about. I found her the same way you did—dreamed about her. She's the one."

"Whoa!" Sherrie interrupted, stepping forward and brandishing her club. "I keep telling you all, I'm not special. I'm just a normal person."

His eyes looked deep within her as John had done earlier, and he shook his head. "No. You're not."

John was gazing at her too now. Two pairs of eyes, warm brown and amber ale, stripped her more naked than she'd been without her clothes on.

"Have some of your people died too?" John asked.

He nodded. "People slip into a coma and waste away like something is draining their lives."

"So you dreamed about Sherrie and tracked her here?"

"Thanks for bringing her halfway. Made it easier for me."

"If you think I'm going to let you have her, you're wrong."

"What are you going to do, kill me and set off another war?" He sneered.

They glared at each other. With that much testosterone charging the air, Sherrie realized she'd have to keep the peace.

"No one's having me. If you'd both calm down and listen to each other, maybe you'd realize you're on the same page looking for a solution to this psychic sickness that's infected your people. You should be working together."

How calm and reasonable she sounded, as if her legs weren't trembling and her stomach churning. As if it wasn't bizarre to be discussing a psychic illness with a pair of shapeshifters. She hadn't realized she

had such cast iron nerve in her—although it had taken quite a lot of that in L.A. to go to countless auditions for parts she never got.

John tore his angry gaze away from the stranger long enough to look at Sherrie and listen to her. He gave a grudging nod before glaring at the panther-shifter once more. “All right. Talk.”

“What’s your name?” Sherrie asked, trying to change the tone from a confrontational grilling to more polite conversation.

The almond eyes turned toward her and flicked up and down her body before meeting hers. “Grant Perron.”

“I’m Sherrie Stoltz. This is John Walker.”

“I know who you are and I don’t care who he is.”

“You know my name? How could you possibly know that?” For some reason, that little detail seemed more incredible than the heaping mounds of impossible she’d already swallowed today.

“I told you. I dreamed about you and then I came to find you.” The words sounded like a purr, a velvet-pawed caress that sent warm chills down Sherrie’s back.

John seized the other man’s chin and turned his face back toward him. “How long ago did the comas start for your people?”

“A couple of months. That’s the first I heard about it anyway.”

“So what do your dreams tell you about me? What am I supposed to do?” Sherrie asked. As she moved closer to the two men, the prickling feeling all over her skin increased. Her hair rose as if charged by static electricity, and lust blossomed in her erogenous zones. Her body ached to be filled as if she hadn’t just had a good pounding by John a few hours earlier.

“Find him, face him.”

“Find who?” John shook Grant’s face, trying to pull his focus away from Sherrie.

She could feel the jealousy rolling off him in waves. He didn’t like Grant being around her. He already considered Sherrie “his”. While his possessiveness was flattering and a part of her responded with an aroused thrill, jealousy didn’t help the situation.

“Touch me again and I’ll rip off your face,” the other shifter announced in a velvety rumble. “I’m talking to the girl.”

Sherrie rolled her eyes and repeated John’s question. “Who is this person? What does he want, how’s he doing what he’s doing and how can we stop him?”

Grant smiled, and his dour expression cracked. If his body was athlete fine, his smile was movie-actor beautiful. “I thought you’d be the one with the answers.”

She didn’t like how he made her feel all fluttery inside, so she snapped, “Well I’m not. I have no clue about any of this and especially not my part in it.”

John had stepped back from the captive and stood with his arms crossed over his naked chest. He'd slipped into his jeans, but was still distractingly shirtless. "Dreams led you here, huh? How do we know you're not in league with this guy?"

Grant rolled his eyes, dismissing the suggestion. "Do you think these ropes could hold me if I didn't want to be held? I'm only talking with you because the girl's right, we need to share what we know and come up with a solution."

John pulled up a chair and straddled it, facing the other man. "It's been a little over a month since the first person in our pack got sick. It took several cases before anyone saw a pattern. Our wisewoman had a dream about Sherrie like you did, and I went to bring her here."

Sherrie continued the story. "Nothing remotely psychic has ever happened to me before, but he showed me a little girl in one of these comas and when I touched her, I saw inside her mind. I experienced everything she did including the being who's keeping her prisoner. He's sucking up her energy while keeping her unconscious."

"Did you see how Liberty came into contact with him?" John asked.

She closed her eyes, trying to recall something more specific than a black, shadowy figure labeled The Bad Man, and she smelled the sharp scent of pine. "In the woods. She heard—no, *felt* someone calling her, and she followed the sound."

Sherrie's heart beat faster. A claustrophobic sense of anxiety swaddled her like cotton. She could hardly breathe and wanted to run from the creature Liberty had been drawn to. Images flashed in her mind like quick edits in an art movie.

"A cave, maybe. Someplace dark and rocky. That's not where she first saw him, but he's holding her there with him now, holding all of their minds with his. It's very confused and fragmented."

Sherrie opened her eyes to find brown eyes and gold watching her once more, searching for answers and maybe salvation.

"They're his prisoners on an astral plane," Perron said matter-of-factly, as if he dealt with the otherworldly all the time. "But if he has a physical body, we can destroy it."

"What if killing him doesn't set them free? What if they die when he dies? We've got to be careful." John rose and paced the room, reminding Sherrie of wolves she'd seen in a zoo habitat walking the perimeter of their enclosure.

"We need to take action. Cut me loose and I'll handle it." Grant strained against his bonds, finally showing some impatience. Sherrie didn't doubt he could break them as promised if he turned into a mountain lion. Although the idea terrified her, a small part of her wanted to see that.

John stopped pacing to glare at him again. "What are you going to do? Your kind is so impetuous. Taking action isn't the same as taking the *right* action."

“And taking *no* action is the wolf way. You have endless councils before you make a decision about anything.”

“I brought her here, which is more than you did.” John pointed at Sherrie, and once more she felt like a prop in their play as they argued about who had the bigger *cojones*.

“Enough. John. Untie him. He’s not our prisoner. He’s an ally. And you, Cat-man, remember you came here for me. Whatever you do, I must be a part of it, so let’s think this through and come up with a solution before you go off half-cocked.”

For a girl who tended toward impetuosity herself, she sounded remarkably like a schoolteacher—*Let’s work together, class*. The only problem was she had no idea what direction their plan should take.

John turned to Perron. “She’s right. We have to lay our differences aside.”

The other man’s lips twisted in a smile that seemed more like a snarl. “Untie me. I’ll be a team player.”

John crouched behind the chair on which Grant Perron sat and loosened the knots he’d just finished tying. Sherrie took stock of the differences and similarities between the two men. They might be night and day as far as coloring and build, but both had a sleek grace and palpable magnetism. If she’d met either of them at a bar, she wouldn’t have known why there was a sense of wildness about them, but would’ve been attracted to it. She *was* attracted to that primal quality in both of them.

Her body vibrated like a violin string tuned too tight, and the desire her interlude with John had slaked began to swell again. She felt as if her body was one raw, pulsing sexual nerve, responding to these men with a mind of its own.

“There’s a network of caves near the peak. We’ll head up there,” Perron announced as he pulled his hands from behind his back and rubbed his wrists.

John grimaced at the other man’s arrogant tone, but held his tongue. He glanced at Sherrie.

She offered him a smile. Locks of his dark hair had fallen over his forehead and she longed to brush them back and kiss him. A fantasy of doing this while Perron watched flashed in her mind, and heat flooded her body. She pictured him, still tied to the chair, erection growing, as she and John fondled and kissed in front of him. He would groan and shift as they stripped and fell on the bed in a tangle of arms and legs. She’d ride John’s cock, breasts bouncing, and meet Perron’s hungry gaze, taunting him with a smile.

Swallowing, she banished her wayward thoughts and darted a glance at the two men, afraid they could read her mind. Perron looked back at her and grinned. Maybe he *could* see into her head—a dream had brought him to her side.

His eyes skimmed over her as if she was still naked, and her nipples tightened. The ropes fell away from his body, and he rose from the chair, his cock bobbing before him.

Sherrie turned to the bed and searched for something to cover his groin. She flung the sleeping bag at him. “Don’t you carry clothes with you when you change?”

"No." The men answered in unison then exchanged a cold-eyed stare.

"Must make for some awkward moments when you turn back into human form."

Grant let the sleeping bag drop from his hand and stalked across the floor with catlike grace to stop in front of Sherrie. John was right behind him, hackles bristling and eyes narrowed. He looked ready to attack if the other man so much as touched her.

"So you've never had a psychic experience before." Grant studied her and his head moved slightly as if he was inhaling her fragrance. "Where are you from? Who are your people?"

She resented the staccato questioning and answered succinctly. "My mom and I never lived in one place long. I don't know who my dad was."

He regarded her silently and nodded. "Well, you're no shifter, but you're not purely human, either." He jerked his head at John. "You had sex with him? What was that like? Did you feel anything strange?"

"That's enough!" John inserted his body between them, standing almost chest to chest with the other man.

Perron snorted. "I'm not asking from curiosity, Balto. She might have latent tendencies only now coming to full maturity. I wasn't always able to dream travel or experience psychic visions myself. It developed within the past couple of years with no particular trigger, as far as I could tell. Or it could be that Sherrie's psychic abilities are brought out by contact with our kind."

"Is something like that possible?" Sherrie thought of how her senses had expanded when she held Liberty's hand and how being around John had made her edgy. After sex her senses were heightened as if she'd been wrapped in a thick quilt before and was now uncovered and wide awake.

"Anything's possible," Perron answered. "Psychic dreaming, precognition, telekinesis and other mental abilities. Energies can be shifted or mutated in many ways. Sex is one of them."

"What am I supposed to do with this power? How does it work?"

"Maybe you can find this entity with your mind, without holding Liberty's hand, and learn his strengths and weaknesses."

John moved closer to Sherrie, sliding a hand around her waist. "I don't want to put her in danger by having her let this thing inside her head. Let's start toward the caves and see if we can size him up physically first."

Grant shrugged. "We can head out now as far as I'm concerned."

"Sherrie will need clothes and hiking gear. I'll get supplies from my shop and be back in a couple of hours. Meanwhile, she can get some sleep."

Perron gave an impatient sigh. "I thought wolves were like Boy Scouts, always prepared, but it looks like you kidnapped her without much of a plan. Now you have to run an errand and leave me to guard her."

"She's not going to be with you."

“Were you planning on leaving her here all alone and unprotected?” Grant’s eyes widened in an astonished cat’s stare. Sherrie couldn’t help smiling.

“Safer than leaving her with you.” John scooped his discarded shirt from the floor and slipped his arms into it.

“I promise not to disturb the lady’s sleep.” He pressed his palm over his heart, but the vow was diminished by the fact that his cock was pointing at Sherrie. “She can keep the door locked and bolted.”

“Go on. I’ll be okay.” Both flattered and mildly annoyed by his protectiveness, Sherrie squeezed John’s arm. She leaned in to plant a kiss on his cheek, but he turned his head and laid claim to her mouth with his. The possessive kiss was for Grant’s benefit, but Sherrie didn’t care. It was hot and deep and pulled on that thread within her that led straight to her clenching pussy. She gripped the sleeves of John’s unbuttoned shirt and longed to slide her hands up his stomach and chest to feel his warm skin and the solid muscle beneath. She felt Perron’s gaze burning into them, watching and craving, and that made the kiss all the hotter.

When she finally pulled away from John and glanced at the panther, his eyes were molten gold.

John whispered in her ear, “Keep the door locked.” He nudged Perron in the back, toward the cabin door.

Sherrie bolted the door then looked out the window, watching the headlights of the Blazer swing away and the taillights disappear down the track. She couldn’t see Grant in the dark, but felt him out there. Was he still man or had he turned into his animal form to patrol the night?

Leaving the window, she went to the kitchen for a bottle of water, which she emptied in a few gulps. She picked up the sleeping bag from the floor and draped it around her shoulders before sitting on the musty futon. There was no way she could sleep with her brain jumping like she was on speed. One twist after another had warped her life into an unrecognizable shape and she couldn’t stop reliving every moment of the past day. She also couldn’t stop picturing a panther prowling outside the door of the cabin.

She wrapped her arms around her body and lay back with her head on the flat pillow, gazing at the bolted door. *I’ve had sex with a wolfman and now I’m lusting after a man who turns into a mountain lion. This has been the weirdest day of my life.* Her muscles twitched, and her skin tingled. She’d never be able to fall asleep...

It didn’t surprise her when Grant Perron was suddenly standing beside the futon, gazing down at her. Locked door or not, she’d known he would come. His appearance was inevitable. It was her destiny.

He didn’t say a word, merely smiled at her, a glorious Apollo of a man with his dark blond hair and white teeth. He sat beside her on the bed and rested his hand on her belly. Her flesh felt branded by the heat. She expected to look down and see her skin smoking.

“Feel me?” His mouth didn’t form the words. They were inside her head as he was.

"Is this a dream?" But she knew it was no mere dream. On some plane beyond the physical, he was with her. Yet every sensation was concrete, and there was none of the flighty change of scenery or storyline that usually accompanied her dreams.

"It's real enough. Don't think too hard. Go with it. You can do whatever you want here. There are no limits."

Sherrie glanced down at her body and saw it was true. Because she wanted to have his hot hand caress her bare skin, she was naked. *No limits*. The very words evoked erotic fantasies. If there were no limits, what would she want to do? The possibilities made her feel indecisive, and so she suggested, "I want you to take control."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

She felt she'd made a deal with the devil as a slow smile spread across his face, but he reassured her by his velvet-pawed caresses on her stomach.

"Don't look so worried. I won't hurt you...more than what you want." His nails scratched her then, light and tickling. It didn't hurt, but sent lustful shivers through her. Her belly twitched violently and her nipples grew taut as he scratched a path up to her breasts. He batted them lightly as a cat would play with a toy, and they jiggled, sending more delicious quivers coursing through her body.

With a deep chuckle, Grant leaned and drew one of her nipples between his lips. He bathed it with his warm, wet tongue, and Sherrie's thighs tensed at the jolt of electricity that speared from his tugging mouth down to her crotch. He lightly plucked at her other nipple with his fingers and then his teasing grew abruptly harsh. His teeth scored her areola, and his fingernails dug into the base of her nipple.

Sherrie yelped and twisted, loving the pain and wanting more. Perron alternated rough treatment with soft suckling and gentle caresses, bringing her closer and closer to climax without touching any part of her except her breasts.

Her eyes closed, and she shivered and thrust her hips against the air.

"Don't come yet." His rough command and the cessation of his touch brought her back from the brink of orgasm.

Sherrie opened her eyes and focused blearily on his handsome face.

"Not yet. We have a long way to go." He cupped a breast in each hand, simply holding them and waiting for her to relax and come down from the edge of climax.

At last he took her mouth in a slow kiss as luxuriant as a bed with satin sheets and pillows. With John there'd been a frenzied, ravenous speed to their fucking, mouths clashing, bodies smashing together. Both of them had been so eager and hungry they'd been incapable of taking their time. But Grant seemed ready to toy with her for hours.

He traced the shape of her lips with his tongue before slipping it delicately between them. His mouth tasted like aged whiskey, heady and powerful, not a physical taste but a sensation. The lines between Sherrie's senses blurred in this dream space; sight became smell, taste and touch were one. Her heart's pounding and Grant's breathing had texture and shape, moss soft and gauze delicate.

He grasped her wrists and raised her arms over her head, pinning them against the musty mattress. Sherrie gripped the edge of the futon, understanding he'd tied her down as effectively as if he'd used ropes. She wasn't to let go.

Her upraised arms lifted her breasts higher. They pressed against his hard chest, and her skin slid against his with a taste like dark chocolate. She arched up, wanting more of his body to cover hers. She needed him between her legs where dampness pooled like dew. If he didn't fill her aching emptiness soon, she'd die.

"Fuck me," she begged silently.

"When it's time," he replied inside her mind. The communication without words was much easier, but also soul-baring. He could see all of her mind. There was no place to hide her ravenous desire, no way to keep any reserve.

But she could feel his need too, growing by the moment. His cock ached to fill her as much as she wanted it inside her. That knowledge gave her power. She rubbed against his rigid shaft, making him groan.

Grant kissed her mouth once more before moving to her exposed throat. He pressed little kisses down the column and swept his tongue across the hollow where her pulse beat. His lips skated along her collar bones. When he reached the mark at the juncture of her neck and shoulder where John had bitten her, he paused and smoothed his tongue over it.

Sherrie caught her breath. She knew what was coming, felt his intention the moment before he bit down. Pain blossomed through her as he covered the mark John had made with a bite of his own. She cried out and gripped the futon frame hard as her body bowed up from the mattress.

Releasing her from his teeth, Grant again licked the spot in a cat's caress then he abandoned her throat and moved farther down her body. Taking hold of her ankles, he spread her legs as wide as they could go on the narrow futon. Cool air brushed like feathers over her heated pussy, which grew even hotter under Grant's examination. His gaze was intense as he explored her body. His fingertip traced her vulva before dipping between the swollen folds to sample her wetness. He slipped one long finger inside, circling her opening then reaching deep to touch a spot that made her jerk. Another finger followed and a third—moving in and out, stretching her, teasing her, making her want more than just his fingers inside her.

After several thrusts, he left her entrance clenching around emptiness. He moved his slick fingers to her clit, applying the perfect amount of pressure, the perfect tickling motion until Sherrie was ready to purr from the sweet caress. Then he abruptly pinched the sensitized bud. Hot cinnamon exploded through her veins and she jerked.

Grant punished her pussy with hard, playful slaps followed by soothing strokes. He leaned down and lapped with his velvet tongue and soon had her writhing, but once more he stopped before she could come. Sherrie was desperate for release, clinging hard to the futon frame, her body vibrating.

Her lover rose and took hold of her hands, pulling her up from the bed. He drew her against his big, hard body and wrapped his warm arms around her. She nestled against him for a moment and listened to the rumble in his chest. Was it fur or flesh she was pressed against? In this dream-plane he seemed to be both animal and man at the same time.

After a brief cuddle, he took her by the shoulders and turned her around. His large palm covered the back of her neck, pushing her head down. *Now you will submit to me.* The message in her mind was delivered in a growl that made her body ache to do exactly what he ordered.

Hands to your ankles, he commanded. Sherrie obeyed. She stooped low and grasped her ankles. Her hair tumbled around her face, her breasts pressed against her thighs and her buttocks lifted into the air. The vulnerable position made her melt inside. She stared at his bare feet on the floor behind her and quivered in anticipation of his touch. Her pussy lips were swollen and wetness dripped down her inner thighs. Would he grab her hips and enter her with one thrust or would he toy with her some more until she begged for him to fuck her?

A soft caress on her ass answered the question. He massaged her lower back and cupped her buttocks, squeezing and kneading gently. Just as she relaxed into his touch, he slapped his palm across both cheeks. The sharp blow made her gasp and twitch. The man was a master at alternating pleasure and pain.

He spanked her again—right cheek then left, light taps and hard smacks. He changed the length of time in between so she wouldn't know what to expect and sometimes he stopped to massage or kiss her tingling flesh. Raspberry blood coursed through her burnished ass and flooded her hanging head. Sherrie felt both figuratively and literally turned upside down.

Please, she sent her tormentor a silent plea. *Please, do it now! I need. I want.*

Hands gripped her hips, fingers digging into her soft flesh. Or were they claws? Was it a monster or a man who spread her cheeks apart and positioned his cock at her entrance? He speared her with one strong thrust, filling her with his thick shaft.

She whined at the pain and pleasure and braced her legs against the weight of his body pushing against hers. When he pulled out, she felt him receding like the surf rolling off a beach and leaving it barren. Then he was back, filling her deeply again. His groin slapped against her buttocks, and his hairy thighs brushed the backs of her legs.

His hands supported her, holding her upright, even as his body nearly rocked her off her feet with another thrust. And another.

Blood pounded in her ears, and her legs shook from the effort of holding steady. But the awkward, submissive posture with her ass in the air was extremely arousing, and Grant's powerful thrusts drove her

closer to climax. When he snaked a hand around her hip and pressed a finger against her clit, the tiny touch put her over the edge. The building tension inside her exploded. She groaned and jerked against his hand while he filled her once more. Ecstasy flooded her, and she whirled away on a tide of pleasure.

Grant grunted as he thrust into her several more times then he came with a warm gush that trickled from her pussy and down her inner thighs like molten gold. This encounter might be in a dream world, but the details were as vivid as any in waking life. Her body sweated. His come was sticky. Her breathing was ragged, and blood pounded through her veins. He groaned, and his cock pulsed in the clench of her inner muscles.

When he was finished, Grant slid his arm around her waist and pulled her upright against his heaving chest. He nuzzled the side of her head and kissed her neck where he'd bitten her.

Sherrie felt something had shifted inside her, like a window opening. She couldn't pinpoint what was different, but she felt energized, even more vibrant than she had after her encounter with John. She turned to face Grant, braced her hands against his chest and looked up into his eyes. *Is this really happening?*

What do you think?

His body felt solid against her, his breath warm on her face, and his come trickled from her pussy. It couldn't get much more real than that. But just as she was about to nod in agreement, Grant disappeared.

Sherrie jerked awake, tangled in the sleeping bag on the futon mattress. She sat up, blinking. The room was empty and the door was bolted with Grant Perron on the other side. She was alone.

She heaved a sigh and pushed her sweaty hair back from her face. She'd never had such a vivid erotic dream in her life or one that had left her body so limp and worn. Her calf muscles were trembling as though she'd really been standing and her ass was tender from the spanking. Her pussy felt like it had been pummeled by a big, hard cock. Just the thought of the encounter made her sex clench and come trickled from inside her.

John Walker, she thought, but her heart and her body knew better. She touched the sore spot on her neck where she'd been marked by both a wolf and a panther.

Chapter Five

Grant woke with a start at the sound of an approaching car engine and pushed up off the ground where he'd been lying in front of the cabin. Walker was back, putting an end to his erotic interlude with Sherrie. The sex had been great, as satisfying as a physical union. The woman's mind was open and adventurous and had wrapped around his with an amazing strength.

Then he thought of Marina, and his post-sex rapture evaporated. He wondered if his sometime-lover was still lingering in a coma or if her shallow breathing had finally stopped.

White light washed over him as the Blazer pulled up before the cabin. Walker jumped out, grabbed a couple of bags from the passenger's side and strode toward him. Grant sensed the aggression tightly leashed in the other shifter, and it made the hair on his neck rise. He longed to slip into his natural form and rumble with this guy.

"How is she?"

"Sleeping, I suppose. I wouldn't know. I never set foot inside the cabin." Grant smiled as he told the truth.

Walker stared at him as though trying to read him before nodding curtly. He tossed one of the bags labeled *Walker Sports* at him.

Grant caught it and examined the shirt, pants and shoes inside.

"You and I should talk," Walker said. "We may not like it, but we're stuck working together, so let's figure out how it's gonna go."

"Okay. How about this? We find the bad guy. We kill him. We go our separate ways." Grant stepped into the jeans and pulled them up his hips.

"It's not that easy. We have no idea what we're up against or how dangerous it is. Like I said before, if we go rampaging in and slaughter him, we might hurt the victims he's connected with."

Irritation flickered through Grant like the tickle of a whip. "I don't need you to school me on psychic connections, Balto. I have friends I'm looking out for too, and I don't plan to do anything to hurt them."

"It's not just about shifters. I don't want to put Sherrie at risk. I won't sacrifice her for the sake of our people."

"We have no idea what we're up against, but you're already running scenarios in your mind? Take it easy. I have no wish to hurt the woman." He cocked his head and studied his would-be partner. "Why do

you care so much? You don't imagine she's your soul mate, do you?" He drawled the words soul mate. Wolves were so devoted to the idea of mating for life it was sickening.

"What I feel or don't feel for her is none of your business," Walker snapped.

"So we've established boundaries. You don't try to give orders, and I won't talk about your relationship. I think we're making progress."

The other man stepped close and gazed into his eyes. Grant could smell the lupine in him and it made his skin prickle.

"Let's be clear," Walker said. "This is about responsibility—something you cats can't comprehend. I took this girl from her home and I intend to keep her safe until this is over."

"Then what? She'll go back to her normal life as if none of this has happened?" Grant couldn't help baiting the guy. It was so easy. "Will your pack let her go? Will you?"

Walker gave a disgusted growl and pushed past, bumping his shoulder. He knocked softly on the door and called Sherrie's name. The note of longing in his voice revealed everything Grant needed to know about how Walker felt. The shifter was in love with the human, fixated on her the way only a wolf could be. It was said once they found their mate, they were nearly obsessed, and Grant believed it. This guy might kill him if he found out what Grant had been up to with her in the psychic realm. He was glad to be a cat. Multiple partners shifting and flowing in an erotic dance was a much more natural way to live. And since he'd discovered his ability to reach across the void of space and take a lover in the astral realm, his sex life had become even more interesting.

After a moment, the door opened. Sherrie's body was backlit, showing her curves under the polyester uniform. Her brown hair was gold-gilded in the halo of light. Grant felt a jolt in his chest, the same adrenaline charge of the heart he got when he shifted, and even though he'd just finished having her, he wanted her again.

It was an interesting effect. Luckily he wasn't an emotional fool like Walker and could tell the connection was purely chemical. His body reacted strongly to her because it was compelled. She exuded strong pheromones that excited him like catnip. They were acting on the other man too. Grant could smell his lust and, oddly enough, Walker's arousal spurred his own. The thought of the man's cock stiff in his pants made Grant even harder.

John cleared his throat. "I've brought you clothes. After you change, we should probably get going even though it's not light out yet. I hope you were able to get some sleep."

"Some." Sherrie smiled and accepted the bags. "Thanks."

She closed the cabin door, leaving the men in the dark.

Grant exhaled. "That woman is something special. I think she may be more powerful than both of us together. You'd better watch out for that one, buddy."

He grinned as Walker stalked past him once more on the way to the Blazer. Wolves were so easy to rile.

John resented every second of Perron's presence. He'd like to bare fangs and tear the smile right off his smug face. It wasn't just the natural conflict between wolf and panther, but this particular man he couldn't stand...and the way he looked at Sherrie.

Still, he couldn't let his personal feelings interfere with the mission, which was to get to the root of the mysterious illness.

Besides, maybe it was only John's imagination that the panther kept leering at Sherrie. Unfortunately, he'd gotten a strange vibe from her as well ever since he returned from town. She wouldn't meet his eyes when he handed her the bags of clothing. Now, as the Blazer climbed the bumpy mountain road, she kept glancing over her shoulder at Perron in the back seat or watching him in the side view mirror. Had something happened while he was gone? Had she unlocked the door and let Perron inside?

John inhaled deeply, searching for the musk of sex. With the swirling pheromones in the air it was hard to tell what he was smelling, but his hackles rose at the mere thought of this other man touching his woman.

Sherrie leaned forward and turned on the radio to fill the silence in the vehicle. There was only one channel available up here in the mountains and the country music was interspersed with static. After several moments, she turned off the radio and sat back to stare out her window at blackness. Then she turned and looked into the backseat at Grant again.

"Tell us more about yourself, Mr. Perron."

"What do you want to know?"

John glanced in the rearview, catching the glint of Perron's golden eyes in the darkness.

"I don't know. What do you do for a living?"

"Nothing as glamorous as owning a sporting goods shop," he replied dryly. "I make what money I need through trading."

"Like muskrat and beaver pelts?" Sherrie asked.

"Like stocks and bonds. We do have satellite Internet connection at the higher elevations. My house is on the next mountain to the north."

"Oh." Sherrie paused for a moment before going on. "What about your people? John said you're scattered about, that you don't live in a community."

"What John doesn't know about panthers would fill an ocean. We do have a community, maybe not tight knit by wolf standards, but we keep in touch. And we're just as concerned about each other as they are in a crisis like this."

"You said you had friends affected. Anyone close?"

“Marina.” Perron’s voice was tight, and for the first time John sensed strong emotion instead of cocky attitude. “My... She’s my lover sometimes.”

“How long ago did she fall victim?”

“Last week. I’ve tried to reach her inside her mind, but it’s like a steel door is barring me. That’s when I knew we had to try to find outside help.”

“And you dreamed about Sherrie,” John supplied. “How exactly does that work?”

“My ability to travel while dreaming only developed during the last couple of years. I have no idea what triggered it,” he admitted. “As for prophetic dreams, this is the first time I’ve had one. I saw Sherrie’s face and was led to her, simple as that. Ask your wisewoman how it works. Maybe she’ll have some insight.”

“I’m sorry about your girlfriend.” Sherrie offered a sympathetic smile. “It must be terrifying to see someone you love struck down like that.”

“She’s a strong woman. I believe she can survive this. She came to the U.S. from Russia six years ago. Slavers brought her along with about a dozen other girls. You’ve read the stories about how women are kept prisoner and used as sex slaves. Well, Marina’s kidnappers got more than they bargained for. She bided her time, let them pay for her passage then ripped them apart.”

Perron gave a rumbling growl of satisfaction. “After that, she found her way to us. It’s important to bring in fresh genes to the pool, don’t you agree, Walker?”

John grunted in reply. Why was it everything the man said to him sounded laced with irony? And why did his skin prickle in a not entirely unpleasant way at the sound of his sarcastic voice? He turned his attention back to driving.

Paved road turned into a rutted trail and soon it was hard to tell there was a path at all. The vehicle hit a rock, sending a jolt through the vehicle that made John’s teeth click together.

“This is as far as we can go,” Perron said. “Pull over and we’ll hike from here.”

John’s jaw clenched. He’d been about to do that, but now he didn’t want to since Perron had commanded it. He drove another quarter of a mile before finally steering the Blazer off the track and parking. He rested his hands on the steering wheel and turned to look at Sherrie in the glow of the dashboard lights.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine.” Her answer was short but accompanied by a smile, so he felt a little better.

He wished they could have a minute alone so he could really talk to her. They hadn’t had time to discuss what had happened between them, and John felt sure it had been more than sex. Some energy had bonded them in a way he’d never felt before. Surely, she’d experienced it too. He had to know.

Perron opened the car door and got out. When he’d closed it behind him, John reached for Sherrie’s arm, stopping her from leaving.

“Are you really okay? I mean about the sex.”

She finally looked into his eyes, and hers glowed in the dim light. “Yes. It was amazing and left me feeling... strangely powerful. I can't explain it, but I'm glad we did it.” She grinned, and her teeth shone like a wolf's. “As a matter of fact, I'd like to do it again.”

Her words allayed his concern that she just wasn't that into him. He let his hand slide down her arm and took hold of her warm hand. “Me, too. I told you I don't usually believe in having sex with humans. Crossing species doesn't seem like a good idea, but something was different with you. I felt—”

“I should tell you something,” Sherrie interrupted.

The driver's door opened. Perron stooped to gaze into the vehicle. “Are you coming? Let's go.”

John got out. Rising to his full height, he still had to look up to meet the panther's eyes. His own were narrowed, and his jaw ached from clenching it. “I don't want to get into a fight with you again. It won't serve any of our needs. But back the hell off.” He jabbed his index finger into the other man's chest before turning away.

After taking out the pack of food and supplies from the back of the Blazer, John slammed the door shut and looked toward his companions standing on the far side of the vehicle. Sherrie leaned toward Perron. Her posture was casual, almost intimate, and she talked quickly with lots of hand gestures. The hair on his nape rose. He swallowed back the growl in his throat as he stalked toward them over crunchy pine needles.

Shouldering the pack, he moved between them and took Sherrie's hand in his. “If you're not used to climbing, this could be hard, especially wearing new hiking boots.”

She squeezed his hand reassuringly. “Not to mention it's almost pitch black. You don't get this kind of dark in the city.”

Perron strode in front of them, leading the way. John was content to let him do so. He had Sherrie by his side.

John's jealousy was an almost palpable energy surrounding him. Sherrie was simultaneously touched and irritated by it. He barely knew her. Where did he get off acting as if he had some hold over her just because they'd had some amazing sex? And what would such a jealous guy do if he found out she'd had spanky dream sex with the panther shifter—a duel over her honor?

She was glad for the thick socks John had brought her which cushioned her feet from the heavy boots, but even with the protection, her heels and toes began to hurt after about fifteen minutes of climbing uphill. Her calves and ass were also screaming in agony. Waitressing kept her on her feet all day, but it wasn't the same thing as clambering over rough terrain. The high elevation wasn't doing her any favors, either, and soon she was huffing and blowing like a winded racehorse.

John supported her with an arm around the waist, half hauling her up the next slope and keeping her from stumbling over stones in the dark.

“We’ll rest soon,” he promised, then yelled at Grant, who’d disappeared into the darkness, to hold up.

When they reached the top of the rise, Grant stood waiting. “I knew she wouldn’t be able to keep up. We can travel faster if we shift and she rides on my back.”

Evidently her life *could* get weirder. But she was exhausted and sore from walking, and the idea of wrapping her legs around a wild beast-man didn’t sound as preposterous or as kinky as it might have.

“Yes, we should shift, but Sherrie stays with me,” John snapped.

“She weighs too much. I’m bigger, a *lot* bigger. I can carry her. Simple logic, Walker. It’s no reflection on your masculinity.”

Sherrie turned to John, taking hold of his arms and looking into his frowning face. “He’s right. It doesn’t mean anything. It’s just practical.”

His brown eyes moved back and forth as if reading hers, and he nodded curtly.

Grant was already half undressed, rolling up his shirt before stuffing it in John’s backpack. Folding her arms, Sherrie looked at the ground, the starry sky turning to gray on the eastern horizon, the silhouetted peak of the mountain...anywhere except at the two men stripping off their clothes. But after a few moments, she couldn’t look away.

There they were, nude and beautiful: Grant, tall, wide-shouldered, golden as the mountain lion he’d soon morph into. And John, a little shorter, also muscular, but with a leaner build. His dark, shaggy hair begged a hand to comb through it. The slight tilt of his eyebrows gave him a permanently anxious expression, but when he caught her look, his teeth flashed in a smile that warmed her like a cup of hot coffee.

Their cocks, which she couldn’t stop herself from looking at, were semi-rigid and growing more erect under her gaze. Did changing from human to animal give them an erotic charge or was it her inspection that aroused them?

Sherrie looked away and stooped to pick up the backpack, slipping the heavy burden onto her shoulders. She felt the air charge with energy as Grant started to change. His body shimmered and twisted, and her heart pounded as the mountain lion inside him was revealed.

The cat was huge and hulking, his shoulders standing as tall as her chest. His head hung down, and he panted, a harsh inhalation and exhalation. Golden eyes rimmed in black gazed at her and then the animal opened its mouth and yowled, revealing scimitar-sharp teeth.

Adrenaline pumped through her system, and her legs trembled with the need to run. Meanwhile, John had completed his transformation and was once again a wolf with a thick ruff of hair at his neck, a bushy tail, long legs and a narrow, angular face.

The two animals couldn't have been more different, yet both stared at her with a predator's focus. Sherrie searched their eyes for a glimmer of the men she knew somewhere inside.

The big cat padded toward her, and she unconsciously took a step back. Grant made a low throbbing sound in his chest and rubbed his enormous head against her hip. John whined and paced side to side, his long pink tongue flicking over his chops.

Animals. Good God, they're actually animals. Her head spun at the surrealistic experience. At the same time, the vigor throbbing through the shifters seemed to infect her. She felt wide awake, alert and aware of every tiny sound and smell in the woods around them. She heard the snapping of a twig and knew it was a mouse scurrying. She inhaled and smelled water, signaling a stream somewhere not too far away. Her mind was open and experiencing the world as they did—primal, direct and undiluted by rational thought. Somehow they were affecting her.

Again Grant rubbed his head against her, knocking her backward. Sherrie reached out a tentative hand and rested it on his warm, soft shoulder, which reached waist-high on her. His rumbling purr vibrated through her hand.

She glanced at the anxiously pacing wolf before moving to Grant's side and slinging a leg over his back. She drew her legs up so her feet wouldn't drag on the ground and dug her fingers into the thick fur of his neck. His muscles bunched and flexed between her legs as he moved forward.

Sherrie had never ridden astride anything besides carousel animals and a motorcycle. No horses, no ponies and certainly no wild mountain cats. With every stride, she slid a little from side to side. Her buttocks clenched, and she dug her knees in harder to keep her seat. The heat between her thighs wasn't only from the beast's body. Her sex clenched in response to the living animal clamped between her legs.

The cat moved fast, prowling around fallen boulders as he headed uphill. John trotted near his left flank, occasionally pausing to lift his muzzle and scent the air.

"We're Off to See the Wizard" played over and over in her head. Who or what would they encounter at the end of their journey and how would they overcome this powerful being?

For a long while, she clung to the panther's furry back and concentrated on not falling off. The flow of his powerful muscles was amazing. She began to get the rhythm of his stride and rose and fell in sync with it. Her tailbone was a little sore, but that had more to do with the spanking and sex earlier than with a bumpy ride. She wondered how it was possible to have physical effects from a dream encounter, but at this point, nothing surprised her.

The sky turned from jet black to midnight blue then foggy gray as they neared the top of the mountain. It felt like hours had passed, but without a watch Sherrie couldn't measure the time.

At last Perron stopped and gave his body a little shake, muscles rippling beneath her. Sherrie dismounted. She patted the big animal's back, and he turned his head to look at her with eyes that glittered

like reflectors. He opened his mouth and gave a hair-raising cry that brought Walker bounding over. The wolf's hackles rose, and he growled threateningly.

Grant hissed before slinking away into the woods. Sherri watched him disappear then turned to find John already changing back into human form. He lay on the ground, hands braced where his paws had been, breathing hard.

Sherrie crouched beside him to touch his heaving back. "Are you all right?"

He nodded without speaking.

"I don't know why you do it when it's clearly so painful." She rubbed his smooth, solid shoulder—all skin, no fur.

He looked up at her, eyes warm and human once more. "I couldn't live without my other half. It's not a choice."

Rising, he took the backpack from her and rummaged through it for his clothes.

"So, did you like your ride?" His voice was muffled as he pulled a T-shirt over his head.

"I guess. Where'd he go, anyway?"

"Hunting for breakfast, I suppose."

Her stomach rumbled at the word. John pulled a few power bars and juice boxes from the pack and offered them to her. "Hope it's enough to fill you up. I didn't want to pack too much."

"This is fine. Thanks." She drank deeply of the tepid juice and wolfed down a bar in a few bites. John opened one of the foil-wrapped bars, but didn't take a bite. He toyed with the wrapping and stared at the ground until the silence between them grew painful.

"Sherrie, did something happen at the cabin when I was gone?"

"Something like what?" She was annoyed that a pang of guilt shot through her.

He met her gaze with his concerned brown eyes, his head slightly cocked. "You know what I mean. With Perron."

"I don't think you have any right to ask me. It's not really your business," she replied stiffly.

"So you did." His gaze was so intense it made her stomach flip, and in that moment she saw the wolf as clearly as if he'd shifted.

"Not like you're thinking. Not physically." She sighed, seeing the hurt flicker across his face and knowing she had to tell the truth. "I was drawn to Grant in the same way I am to you. This desire is outside the realm of normal. Like your shifting. The urge to...connect with each of you seems to be beyond my control. And it seems to be changing me."

"How?"

She shook her head. "I don't know exactly, but I can feel it. My senses are more open, and my mind expanded. It's like I'm seeing things clearly for the first time."

She crumpled the power bar foil in her fist, wishing she didn't have to hurt him, willing him to understand. "I was with Grant, sexually, in my dreams or maybe on an astral plane. It was as vivid as real life."

There was no need to add she'd felt the physical results later, or that she'd felt even more empowered by that encounter than she had after having sex with John.

"Sex in your dreams," he repeated quietly, looking past her at the trees.

She got up and knelt before him, putting her hands on his. "Listen. This isn't about romance or commitment or which one of you I like better. Honestly, I don't know either of you well enough to make some kind of emotional bond so soon. This is about a crazy lust that feels like it's coming from beyond me and, strange as it sounds, I think it's part of why I'm here."

"To fuck shifters?" His tone was as bitter as coffee grounds.

"To build energy for whatever lies ahead. The joining with you and with Grant felt right, even necessary, and I refuse to be apologetic about it."

He nodded once, a single bob signaling he acknowledged but didn't like what she had to say. "Fair enough."

Her chest ached. Despite her declaration that she had no emotional investment in John, her heart seemed to have other ideas. She liked him a lot and didn't want to hurt him. She stroked her hands from his wrists up his arms to his shoulders and nudged her body between his knees. Peering into his eyes, she felt another flicker of something more than lust shimmer through her body.

His arms went around her back, drawing her closer, and his lips descended on hers, touching lightly then sealing them in a firm kiss. He stroked her hair, settling his hand at the nape of her neck to support her head. It was a comforting gesture, and Sherrie felt she could remain content in his warm embrace for a long time.

A crash in the underbrush broke them apart. They turned to face the mountain lion leaping into the clearing. He landed with a flourish of his long, thick tail and almost instantly began to shimmer and change. Sherrie froze with her arms around John's neck, watching the cougar face with its cocoa-trimmed muzzle and ears twist into human form. She didn't think she could ever grow accustomed to the bizarre sight.

When the transformation was finished, Perron stood naked before them, his tawny fur replaced by smooth skin, only his chest and stomach lightly furred with gold. Sherrie exhaled the breath she'd held. He really was an astonishingly beautiful man. In her embrace, John's body stiffened and he growled softly.

The last thing she needed was to deal with male jealousy right now. She squeezed his tense shoulders and rose to her feet.

"I scouted the area. Didn't find anything." Grant rummaged in the backpack for his jeans and pulled them on as he looked at Sherrie. "What do you think? You feel anything?"

“Me?” She was taken aback. Somehow she’d imagined one of them would have a plan once they got close to their destination.

“Yeah, you. Do you sense this guy? What’s your radar telling you?”

Sherrie closed her eyes and tried to calm the tumult of her thoughts. Breathing slowly, she let the buzzing energies inside her settle to a low hum and opened her mind to listen.

She felt the presence of her two companions—*Earth and fire. Grounded and unpredictable*—and the mountainside around her. *Breeze, trees, leaves, rock, stone, animal bone*. The little rhyme made her smile, but the experience was profound. She didn’t simply feel air on her flesh or hear it in the trees; didn’t merely feel the ground beneath her feet or smell pine trees. She experienced the woods around her as if they were a part of her very cells. As she expanded outward, she took in more and more of the world until she thought she could feel the stars whirling overhead and the sun rising inside her.

“Oh!” she gasped, eyes snapping open.

“What is it?” John was beside her, steadying her with a hand on her back.

Grant approached, still buttoning his shirt. “Got something?”

Sherrie was giddy, blood rushing through her veins, mind racing as if she were on speed. “It was...wow!” She shook her head and tried a more lucid explanation. “I was outside of myself. I felt...everything, all around me.”

“Great. So, look for him. Must be some kind of connection or you wouldn’t be here. Reach out. Hunt.” The panther touched her arm lightly, and the moment he did, a jolt of energy shot through her. From John’s hand on her back to Perron’s hand on her arm, an arch of electricity crackled like lightning.

Sherrie gasped. Her gaze flew back and forth between the two men to see if they felt it too. Both pairs of eyes were as shocked as hers must be. John frowned, while a big smile curved the corners of Grant’s mouth.

“What the hell?” John pulled his hand away, breaking the connection. Immediately, the electric charge fizzled and popped out like the delicate filament in an incandescent bulb breaking.

Sherrie blinked, stunned. Her body still thrummed with residual energy, and she felt she could fly to the moon and back by simply leaping off the ground like some comic book superhero: Shifter Avenger—able to track down and destroy evil psychic monsters with her magic mojo.

Once more she closed her eyes and opened her mind. It was even easier this time to expand her consciousness and float outside herself. She searched the strands of life around her, the flora and fauna that covered the mountain, until she found a dark strand like a polluted stream in the landscape. It marked the natural fabric like a stain, and she followed the thread, searching for its source, already recognizing the evil vibration of the being she’d encountered in Liberty’s mind.

As she neared her goal, she stopped. She could sense his smoggy presence, very close now, but was afraid to draw his attention to her like the eye of the evil dude in the *Lord of the Rings* movies. Could this

being actually harm her here on this astral plane if he discovered her searching for him? It seemed his power was more of the mind than the body, and Sherrie wasn't about to get herself imprisoned in a coma like Liberty. She drew back and waited.

She focused on her quarry, felt his looming form near her—dark and dangerous, saturated with evil like pus oozing from a wound. Adrenaline rushing through her urged her to run, even though she wasn't in the physical world. This experience was vivid, like the sex with Grant had been. Her mind's eye was wide open, taking in the landscape around her. She began to get a sense of the place in the world where The Bad Man's corporeal form existed. There was a rocky outcropping, a deep ravine, a stream of water trickling over mossy stone, the mouth of a cave. If she saw the physical place, she would recognize it.

Sherrie turned her attention to her opponent, testing the thin thread of consciousness that had led her to him. He was like a monster tied to the other end of the string. If she pulled too hard, he might come roaring down on her. But she wanted to find out as much as she could about him without letting him become aware of her presence.

Anger was the first element she registered. Misery, hatred, self-loathing and rage shimmered along the thread that connected them like two kids on either end of a tin can phone. This was one unhappy creature, however powerful he might be, and Sherrie began to get a picture of why he was sucking up energy like a vacuum cleaner. Revenge. He wanted to become insanely powerful and hurt those he felt had done him wrong.

She wasn't sure how she knew this, but Sherrie knew in her gut she'd discovered the elemental truth about The Bad Man. There would be no reasoning with him. His goal was simple. He wanted to inflict as much damage as possible and prove himself a superior being over everyone who'd ever demeaned him.

Sherrie moved closer, wanting to catch a glimpse of the man, not just feel his essence. That slight movement drew his attention to her. He emerged from the shadows of the cave and stood staring at her with eyes that burned like fire. She inhaled a sharp breath and stepped back then stood frozen, staring into his fiery gaze.

"You're here." As in her interlude with Perron, the words bloomed in her mind. "At last."

"You were expecting me? Who are you?" She searched his face for something familiar, but found nothing. His appearance was so average—a man of medium height and build, receding brown hair revealing a lined forehead, a plain nose and mouth and no unusual characteristics that would draw anyone's attention. He was so normal that a person could look at him and through him and forget him in the next instant. Only his burning eyes betrayed his anger and his power.

"Should I know you?" she asked.

"You've never seen me before, but you know me, inside, like I know you, don't you?" His cryptic answer was coupled with a smile that revealed crooked teeth.

"What are you? Are you a shifter?"

His laughter was mirthless and rang unpleasantly inside her head. “No. Not a shifter. Not any more than you are.”

Sherrie struggled to understand what she was missing. She opened her mind further, reached toward him, invited him inside. “Explain.”

“Do you really want to know?” He was suddenly right in front of her. His body smelled like wet wool, and she could feel the warmth as if he were physically present. “It’s time you knew the truth about yourself. About everything.”

“What truth? Who are you?” she repeated, so eager to learn his secret—and apparently hers—that she nearly forgot the danger. “Tell me.”

He touched her cheek with his hand then curved it around the back of her neck, never breaking eye contact. Even as she leaned toward him, listening, it struck her that she was under a spell, mesmerized by his eyes and drawn in by his suggestion of earth-shaking secrets. *The Garden of Eden*, she thought. *The serpent and the fruit of knowledge. Christ, Sherrie, wake up!*

She shook her head, breaking the spell, and pulled away. His hand was smoke. There was no insistent pressure on the back of her neck because he wasn’t real. This place wasn’t real. It was all a dream. The moment she perceived it that way, Sherrie was swept through time and space as though she was a yo-yo and someone had yanked her string.

She slammed back into her body with a force that rocked her off her heels, and she sucked in a deep breath that seared her lungs. Her eyes flew open as she cried out.

“Are you all right?” John was there beside her, holding her again.

Grant, on her other side, anchored her to earth and completed the connection, feeding her revitalizing energy. “What happened?”

“I saw him. I talked to him. Damn, it was like he was right in front of me, but it was more than seeing his face. I got a sense of what makes him tick.”

“And what is that?” Perron asked, while John helped her to sit and offered her juice.

Sherrie took a long swallow. She felt oddly guilty telling the intimate feelings of the stranger even if he was hurting the shifters. His soul had been so raw and exposed—hurt and loneliness entwined with rage and vindictiveness.

“It’s about payback,” she finally said. “I don’t know what shifters have done to this guy, or what he thinks they’ve done, but he’s mad as hell and he’s not going to take it anymore. That’s the gist of it.” She hesitated before telling the rest. “When he saw me, it was like he knew me and was expecting me. He was about to tell me some big secret when I pulled away and came back here.”

She put her hand on her chest, feeling her heartbeat and reassured by the solidity of her breastbone beneath her palm. Traveling in the astral realm was a little disconcerting, and she was glad to be grounded with John crouched by her side, one hand resting on her knee and his worried eyes studying her.

"I don't like putting you in danger like this." He glanced at Perron. "We should go on alone, leave her here."

"Unguarded. Good thinking. Especially since he can reach her whether we're with her or not." Grant tapped his temple. "Inside. Not a lot you can do to protect her from that, McGruff."

Sherrie stood, a little unsteady on her legs, but energized and ready to go. "I can lead you to him. It's as clear as if I had a map." She could almost see a neon line laid out in front of her. "By the time we find him, maybe we'll know what to do."

John nodded, but didn't look happy as he shouldered the backpack.

Sherrie led the way from the clearing up the steep, rocky slope. The ground was treacherous, and shale slipped beneath her feet, making her stumble. Either John or Grant was always right there, ready to catch her.

As the sun rimmed the mountain peaks with gold, morning mist shrouded them. It was like walking through a primeval land where a dinosaur might emerge at any moment. The world was hushed, not even a birdcall disturbing the silence. The only sounds were their footsteps and the sliding stones beneath their feet.

After two nights with very little sleep, Sherrie should've been dragging, yet she'd never felt more keyed up. She had a sense of marching toward her destiny, which should've been frightening, but was invigorating. At last she'd know why she was here—not here on the mountain, but on earth. All her life she'd felt a little different, a little set apart from other people. She used to think it was because she and her mom moved so often that she'd never made very close friends, but when she was being honest with herself, she knew her "otherness" was more than that. As an actress, she'd tried on different personas, but none of them had filled the void, nor did hooking up with men. Maybe this stranger on the mountain, crazy or evil as he might be, could give her a real answer about herself.

The sun began to burn the fog away. Sherrie started to sweat as she climbed, and her calves ached more than ever, but she recognized the rocky outcropping she'd seen in her dream. She walked toward it faster. On either side, her two companions flanked her as they climbed the path out of a ravine.

"Is this the place?" John asked. "Maybe we should find another approach that's less exposed. The guy's probably keeping a lookout. Or he might have scouts working for him."

Sherrie shook her head. "No. He's alone up here." *Always alone.*

John reached for her arm. "Wait. We still don't know exactly what we're facing or the extent of his power. He might—"

There was a rumbling noise, and the ground trembled. More of the loose shale crumbled from beneath Sherrie's feet, and she fell, stones stabbing into her knees. She'd lived in L.A. long enough to immediately think, *Earthquake*. But that wasn't likely here. As John landed on top of her, shielding her body from a shower of pebbles and stones, she amended her thought to *Avalanche!*

Rocks tumbled around them. She caught a glimpse of Grant jumping out of the way of a large boulder as it crashed past him before grit drifted into her eyes, obscuring her vision. She squeezed them shut. John grunted near her ear, and she guessed he'd been struck by a rock.

The ground beneath them gave way. They slid down the slope, back into the ravine they'd just climbed out of. Sherrie reached in vain for John's hand as he tumbled away from her then she grabbed for anything to stop her fall. Her fingers scrabbled against rock and hard earth, her fingernails digging into dirt, but there was nothing to stop her fall. Gravel and rock pelted her until she landed on the ground with a breath-jarring thump.

As quickly as it had started, the rock slide ended. Sherrie blinked and coughed, clearing her eyes and throat of dust. She rose on her hands and knees to look around. Nearby, John sat and shook dust from his hair. Not far away on the other side of her, Grant lay prone beside a boulder the size of a Volkswagen.

She staggered to her feet and over to him, heart pounding. Crouching by his side, she wiped rubble and blood off his face.

His eyes opened and fixed on hers. "You all right?"

"Yeah. What about you?" She dabbed at a wound on his temple, and her fingers came away smeared with the blood that welled from the deep gash.

John knelt beside her. Taking off the pack that had miraculously remained on his back, he pulled out a bottle of water and a spare T-shirt. He moistened the cloth and wiped Grant's face, patting the open wound carefully. The other man hissed and grabbed the shirt from him to take over the job himself.

Sherrie sat back on her heels and looked around. The sheer face of the mountain rose on either side of them. The path they'd climbed toward the caves was cut off by boulders, and the way into the crevasse was sealed behind them with more rocks. They were hemmed in on all sides in a natural stone prison. Perhaps in their animal form either John or Grant might have the strength to clamber over the rock fall, but Sherrie doubted it.

"We're trapped." She stated the obvious as she craned her neck to look up the wall of rock. Somewhere at the top was the cave where their nemesis lived. Was this avalanche a coincidence or had he meant to kill or capture them?

John moved around the perimeter, pacing the limits of their enclosure. Perron got to his feet, tossing the bloodied T-shirt aside and scaled a pile of stony rubble. He attempted to climb over the boulder that had nearly crushed him.

"Damn it!" he roared in frustration as he fell back and landed on his feet.

"I told you rushing into this was a bad idea," John said. "Now we're trapped. I'm sure it's no accident."

Grant scowled and started to take off his shirt. "You can stand here and complain about being stuck. I'm shifting and finding a way out."

Without another word, Walker followed his example, quickly stripping. Once again their bodies rippled. Charged static electricity lifted Sherrie's hair and made her arms prickle. Suddenly, she longed fiercely to be able to shift too. Into what form she had no clue, but the idea of releasing the primitive animal inside her to howl and run was deeply seductive.

She pressed back against the stone as the two wild beasts ranged around the pen in a similar way to their human counterparts. The wolf nosed the ground and whined as he searched for a break in the rock pile big enough to squeeze through. The big cat gathered its weight and sprang with a powerful thrust of his hind legs, but the leap carried him only halfway up the boulders. His nails scrabbled on stone before he fell back into the debris with a howl of rage, tail lashing.

There's no way out, but feed me their energies and I'll release you. The voice sounded in Sherrie's head as clearly as if she wore headphones. She clapped her hands to her ears. It was one thing to receive silent communications in a dream, but shocking in her waking life.

Join me, and together we can have limitless power.

Get out of my mind! She shook her head, clearing it of the seductive haze that had settled over her like morning mist. She was beginning to understand how this guy worked—a chance meeting, mesmerizing eye contact and next thing he was inside your mind, manipulating it. Well, she was too strong to give in to that.

Besides, her animal companions were starting to squabble. Perron brushed past Walker in his furious pacing to and fro, and the wolf bared his teeth and growled. In response, the giant cat roared. The pair faced off, hackles raised, their bodies tensed to attack.

“Hey!” Sherrie shouted. “Stop it!”

They ignored her and continued to stalk in a circle around each other, gazes locked together. John's menacing growl rumbled louder. Grant's ears were laid flat. He hissed and sprang at John, his huge body bowling him over. They wrapped around each other, teeth flashing, claws ripping, tumbling over and over. The wolf managed to grip the cat's throat and pin him for a moment, but a heartbeat later, the much bigger panther was on top.

“Shit!” Sherrie could see John was going to get the worst of it since Grant outweighed him and had razor sharp cat-claws. She scooped up a rock and threw it at the fighting animals. It didn't slow them down. They continued to bite and claw at each other with a ferocious noise that made gooseflesh rise on her skin.

Sherrie picked up a larger rock and heaved it at the panther's head. It crashed into his shoulder and knocked him sideways. The panther released his opponent and turned toward her, showing sharp fangs. Her heart pounded. At that moment, she was terrified for her life. These were two dangerous animals who might not remember their human side in the heat of battle.

“Stop fighting,” she yelled. “This isn't helping.”

The wolf crawled from beneath Perron's body and staggered to his feet, whining and shaking his head. One ear was bent and bleeding. The panther backed off, still hissing, before turning to lick his wounded flank.

"We have to work together to get out of here. Stop acting like idiots." She felt like the idiot, talking to a pair of animals as if they'd understand her. She wondered how much of their intellect was functioning. Moving closer, she held out a hand toward each beast, palms open. She touched John's muzzle, the top of Grant's head, and stroked both soothingly. Soft fur caressed her palms and, once again, an electric charge entered her from contact with the two shifters. Lust, power, strength and awareness flowed through her.

Almost simultaneously, the two beasts began to change to human form. She felt the vibration, the twisting beneath her hands, and pulled away to watch while skin replaced fur and animal features became human once more.

Given their situation, she shouldn't have had a lustful thought to spare at the sight of their nude bodies, yet her body seemed to have a will of its own. One glimpse of John's dark-haired chest and groin and his semi-rigid cock made her stomach flutter. He bent his head to examine the clawed flesh on his side, and she longed to kiss his wound better. Grant looked just as sexy with his ruffled blond hair, one hand rubbing a band of tooth marks around his throat. An image of the pair of them locked together, not in combat, but in a sweaty sexual clinch, flashed in her mind. Liquid heat bloomed between her legs.

"Are you two quite finished?" she demanded, using anger to distract her from the mounting urgency of her desire. She threw a pair of jeans at Grant, and he caught them, but didn't put them on. They dangled from his hand as he stood like a glorious statue and examined their rocky prison.

"Maybe we could boost you up," John said. "You could find your way back to the Blazer and drive to town for help."

Sherrie stared at the imposing height. "I think we're pretty well trapped."

She had a growing sense this was playing out exactly as it must and they'd find it impossible to escape their cage even if she was able to reach the top of the rock. They were trapped here together for a reason. Deep inside, she felt something was about to happen between her and these two men—a union that couldn't be stopped. It both frightened and excited her, but it was undeniable. Only together could they free themselves and overcome their enemy.

Chapter Six

Grant was near panic, although he'd never let the others know it. He hated being caged with a fiery passion. His palms were slick with sweat, and his breathing was shallow, but damned if he'd have a panic attack in front of Walker. He'd turned his fear into rage and directed it at the wolf. Rolling around on the ground biting and scratching had been better than falling apart. Now he scanned the top of the cliff wall and the morning sky overhead. Somewhere up there was the asshole who was playing with them like marionettes.

"Hey." Sherrie was suddenly beside him, offering a bottle of water from the knapsack. "You look really pale. Sit down and rest." She pressed her hand on his shoulder, and the warm contact distracted him from his apprehension. In two seconds flat, he went from near panic at the idea of being trapped to wanting her with a bone-shaking desire. His libido always ran hot, but his instant reaction to this woman was abnormal. More magic like the dream travel.

Grant stared down into her light green eyes then at her plump lower lip that beckoned him to kiss it. Obeying his instinct, he dipped his head to cover her soft mouth with his. Potent energy passed between them. He closed his eyes and drank it in—until a hard hand thumped his shoulder, pushing him away.

"Hey!" Walker stood between them, fists clenched.

Sherrie grabbed his arm. "It's all right." She put her hand on his cheek, drawing his attention to her face, and repeated softly, "It's all right."

Rising on her toes, she kissed the wolf, a light peck at first that soon became a deep, searching kiss. Grant's already hard cock stiffened even more. He palmed his erection, squeezing lightly as he watched the hungry mashing of lips and tongue. Then he put a hand on Sherrie's hip, completing the joining, and once again a powerful jolt crackled through all three of them, their energies entwining as well as their bodies.

Grant accepted the sensation with a satisfied grunt, but the wolf broke away, his eyes wide and worried. "Damn!"

"This is supposed to happen, the three of us together." Sherrie sounded confident, almost serene. "Can't you feel it, John? Don't fear it or fight it."

She took his hand and pulled him back to her, planting another searing kiss on his lips.

Grant agreed. There was something about the proximity of their bodies that built up a crazy, static charge. He wasn't inexperienced with three or moresomes, but this was something completely different. He moved behind Sherrie, pressed against her and slid one of his hands around her smooth, naked stomach

beneath her shirt. His other hand rested on the sharp blade of Walker's hip. Surprisingly, the wolf didn't push it away. Maybe he didn't notice, as caught up as he was in kissing Sherrie.

Grant had no problem playing back up to their lovemaking, at least until the wolf took the stick out of his ass and opened up to the possibilities in a ménage. Then he might seek a more active role. But sharing partners of either sex wasn't foreign to a panther. He loved the pleasure of several bodies tumbling together, the stroking hands, roaming mouths and whispered demands; the growing sense of union when you no longer knew exactly who was licking or touching you. Rubbing his cock against Sherrie's denim-covered ass, he lapped her warm nape, tasting salt and dust.

As Walker kissed Sherrie's mouth, he glanced at Grant over her shoulder with eyes more lust-filled than peeved for once. The magic of their joining was stronger than his ingrained need to claim a mate for himself alone.

Grant slid his hand farther up Sherrie's belly to cup her breast through her bra. His hand was trapped between their two bodies, Walker's hard chest against the back, Sherrie's soft tit filling his palm. Grant continued to nuzzle her neck and the bite mark on her shoulder and waited to see what Walker would do next.

After a few moments, the wolf pulled away from her mouth. He gazed into Sherrie's eyes and Grant's, a silent message of agreement to do this thing, then he pulled her jacket off her arms. He reached for the hem of her long-sleeved T-shirt and lifted it. Grant took his hand from her breast to unfasten her bra in back while Walker peeled the shirt over her head. In seconds she was as bare-chested as they, her pink-tipped breasts rising and falling with her unsteady breathing.

Grant slid his arm back around her and cupped one soft mound, rolling the taut point between his finger and thumb. Walker bent his head and took the other nipple in his mouth. Sherrie moaned and thrust her chest. The hungry sound and arching of her body sent a renewed wave of lust through him. His hard-on was starting to be painful as it pressed into the cleft of her ass. Too much denim there. He needed to feel her bare bottom cradling his shaft.

Leaving Walker to tend to her tits, he felt for the button on the fly of her jeans. After loosening it, he unzipped and pulled the jeans and underwear down her legs. He knelt, unlaced her hiking boots and helped her out of them and her jeans.

Grant rose to his feet to gaze at Sherrie's round and inviting ass, the muscles clenched tight. He held a cheek in each hand and squeezed. Pulling the globes gently apart, he slid his erection into the groove between. Heat surrounded him, the pleasure magnified by the growing energy filling them all.

Their joining was stirring up powerful things in the ether. It made Grant's hair rise. If he was in cat form, his fur would be snapping with static electricity. But he was temporarily human, and the only thing sparking here was the friction of his cock rubbing against Sherrie's ass. He'd love nothing more than to shove inside that sweet, tight hole he was gliding over, but the time wasn't right for that—not yet anyway.

This time, he'd simply hold her and maybe jack off against her backside while Walker filled her pussy and brought her to climax.

Just watching could be greatly pleasurable too.

Having Perron hold Sherrie while he fucked her wasn't exactly how John had envisioned their next sexual encounter, but he was surprised to find it didn't upset or annoy him as much as it might have. In fact, he had to admit he was turned on by Grant playing a supporting role and watching.

The aura of power shimmering around them was overwhelming, and John felt if he didn't get inside her soon, he'd explode. But as eager as he was to be in her, he wanted to make sure Sherrie was as ready as he was. He bent and suckled her breasts, plucking one nipple while he licked and sucked the other. The warm weight of her breast in his hand and filling his mouth sent an aching heaviness through his cock. The need to possess her, to claim her, was irresistible.

Sherrie moaned softly and again pushed her chest toward his mouth. John glanced up to see her heavy-lidded eyes and Grant's both watching him, which was an amazing turn-on. The panther had pulled her jeans off and, from the movement of his body, he was thrusting against her ass.

John couldn't restrain himself from nipping. He loved to bite during sex, and his wolf partners loved it too. Even though he was gentler with Sherrie, he still elicited a gasp from her as his teeth dug into her sensitive nipple. Meanwhile, he slid his hand down her belly, touching Perron's fingers gripping her waist in passing. That light brush sent sparks through him. The foreignness of sharing a mate with another male was shockingly arousing.

John dipped his fingers between the plump folds of her cunt. She was so incredibly wet and, as he thrust them into her entrance, impossibly hot. His cock throbbed, aching to replace his fingers inside her, but first he knelt to lick her pussy and bring her right to the edge of coming. Spreading her labia wide, he delicately flicked his tongue along her seam, tasting her musky juices.

Sherrie thrust her hips, grinding her pussy against his mouth. Her feminine moan was a counterpoint to Perron's quiet groan, and the mingled sound of their pleasure tightened the bowstring of John's lust even tauter. His body was one raw, vibrating nerve, and his groan combined with theirs. Feeling the bud of her clit with the tip of his tongue, he lapped over it with steady strokes. He loved her taste and the feeling of her body responding to his touch. Her inner muscles clenched around his fingers, and she thrust her pussy toward him with louder whimpers.

John breathed in her scent as he brought her closer and closer to climax. When he judged she was almost there, he rose and moved in close, guiding his cock to her pussy. Behind Sherrie, Perron lifted her body and rocked his hips against her, rubbing his cock in the groove of her ass. John met his gaze as he pushed inside her, sandwiching her between them.

Sherrie slid her arms around him, pulling him to her and driving her body onto his erection. John lowered his face to her mouth, taking her lips in a possessive kiss as he filled her. He couldn't ignore the other shifter, but he could show him whose woman Sherrie really was. He pulled out and entered her again, grunting at the strength of his thrust.

The heat of her body against his, the slide of skin against skin and the heavenly wetness of her pussy combined to bring him to the brink of orgasm after only a few thrusts. *Mine*, his mind claimed as he filled her again and again. *Ours*, Perron's voice sounded in his head.

John glanced up at him sharply, and Perron grinned as he bent and sucked on the bite mark on Sherrie's neck.

John growled and thrust harder, laying claim to his mate.

Sherrie felt she was melting between the two hot bodies cradling her. John had worked her to the very edge of coming before pulling away. Now that he'd entered her and was growling near her ear, it took only a few thrusts before she came hard. She clung to his sweaty shoulders and gasped at the force of her climax. She'd never experienced anything like the pleasure of two men making her the center of their attention. Not two men, but two paranormal beings who'd unleashed an incredible power inside her.

Sherrie plunged her hands into John's shaggy hair and pulled him to her for a deep, sucking kiss. His body bucked against hers, and Grant supported the weight of them both, cradling Sherrie and purring—yes, actually purring. She could feel the vibration against her back.

Shimmering waves of pleasure continued to wash through her while John pounded into her faster and harder, his body slapping against hers. She could tell by his increasing grunts he was close to coming. The primitive sound incited a new rise of excitement in her and...Good Christ, she was going to come again!

As John growled against her shoulder and his hips pumped, a series of firecrackers snapped through her nervous system—pop, pop, pop. She jerked as if she'd been hit by voltage from a defibrillator and her eyes rolled back in her head. Power surged through her and the wolfman in her arms howled as he came.

Sherrie panted as she came down from her high. Her hair clung to her sweating face. Both she and John were drenched in sweat as they melded together. Even as she gathered her fragmented senses and slowed her breathing, Grant let them know he was no longer content to be a bit player.

Reaching around Sherrie's body, he pushed John off her and turned her to face him. She looked up into the taller man's face. His golden eyes shone like an animal's caught in headlights. He lifted Sherrie in his arms as if she weighed nothing and settled her onto his cock. Her pussy was still pulsing from her orgasm and tender from John's hard ramming. Slippery and soft, it shaped around Grant's probing girth and enveloped him. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she held on as he bounced her up and down on his shaft. Her bobbing breasts rubbed against his lightly furred chest, tickling her sensitive nipples.

Over Grant's shoulder, she saw John watching with narrowed eyes. She wasn't sure if his expression was annoyed or aroused. She smiled at him and reached out a hand, welcoming him to come close. He sidled over, standing beside her and Grant, and slipped his hand around her waist above where Grant clutched her buttocks. Instantly Sherrie felt the connection again, the strange enhancement of her senses that happened whenever the three of them touched simultaneously.

She held onto Grant with one arm, slid the other around John's neck and leaned toward him. She kissed him, tasting the musk of her body on his tongue. The beginnings of a third orgasm began to rumble inside her like distant thunder. Impossible! She'd never managed more than two in a row, tops. Multiple orgasms were an urban legend as far as she was concerned, the stuff of articles in women's magazines that claimed to know the top ten tricks for enhancing your sex life. But then, until yesterday, she hadn't believed in werewolves or panther shifters either.

She couldn't deny the growing thunder that rolled through her. She pulled away from John's mouth to suck in a breath of air and caught a glimpse of Grant's face twisted in a scowl of ecstasy. At the same moment she felt him come inside her, a strong burst of fluid. He snarled like an angry tomcat, and her inner muscles clamped around him as her mounting urgency bloomed into another powerful climax.

This time the power churned through her with unstoppable force. Not a mere bodily reaction but something much more—too big to be contained inside her fragile human body. The energy burst forth from her—from all of them—like an electromagnetic wave. Her hair crackled with electricity, and the wave swept outward from their threesome as if they were ground zero of an atomic bomb. Air rushed away, leaving them in a temporary vacuum that devoured all sound. The ground trembled. Loose stones and rocks tumbled away from them at the force of the wave.

Sherrie's chest compressed, and she couldn't breathe for a moment, but then the air came rushing back in, filling the void. She heard the crash of falling rocks. When she looked toward the wall of rubble that had sealed them into the ravine, it had blown outward from the force of the blast, leaving a gaping hole and air full of swirling dust.

Chapter Seven

As the dust sifted through the air, powdering all of them from head to toe, Sherrie clung to the two shifters and gaped at the destruction of their prison wall.

“That was unexpected,” she murmured, and the understatement made her laugh even as the last quakes of her climax shimmered through her.

Grant lifted her off his flagging cock and set her on the ground. John slipped a supporting arm around her waist, which was a good thing because her legs were trembling. All three of them coughed and brushed grit from their eyes.

“We’d better get moving.” Grant stooped, picked up Sherrie’s jeans and tossed them at her.

John caught the jeans and handed them to her then cupped her cheek and looked into her face with his soulful brown eyes. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, touched at his unrelenting concern for her. She couldn’t remember the last time a guy had been so protective and sweet. Maybe Ryan a little, at first, until he’d turned out to be a jerk, ditching her in L.A. in an apartment she couldn’t afford with household bills in arrears. She smiled at John.

“I’m fine. Fantastic, actually.” Her body felt supercharged, like she was a superhero or a junky on a high. “I feel like I’m ready to take this guy on. The only question is how.” She stepped into her underwear and jeans, pulling them up her dust-smearred legs.

“First thing is to find him then we’ll figure out how to break him.” Grant was already half dressed in jeans and boots. He delved in the backpack and threw them each a bottle of water.

Sherrie guzzled most of hers and used a little to rinse her face. She dressed quickly, but even so the shifters were both waiting for her by the time she’d tied her shoes. She wished she had a moment to process what had just happened, but there was no time. They should leave the ravine before their nemesis realized they were free. Nemesis—not a word she’d ever expected to use in her lifetime. What would be next? Minions? She shuddered and hoped not.

Grant shouldered the backpack this time and forged ahead. John took Sherrie’s hand, helping her climb over the remaining rubble blocking the path. They went back the way they’d come, down the steep slope, as the path leading up had been virtually destroyed. Besides, they could be picked off one by one by anyone watching that pass.

“Now what?” Sherrie panted as she trotted along trying to keep up with John’s long, loping gait.

“We’ll go around, find another way up.”

“And then?”

He shrugged and continued walking fast.

“Could we hold up a minute?” Sherrie called out to Grant, who was yards ahead of them and disappearing into the undergrowth. “Maybe make some kind of plan before we go any farther?”

The panther shifter glanced over his shoulder. “Soon. I want to make sure we’re safely out of range first.”

She took a deep breath, pain lancing through her side, and ran on. Her feet ached from the chafing of her new shoes, and her panties were soaked with come, a sticky, uncomfortable sensation. But other than those discomforts, she was still glowing inside. She wondered if she possessed some powers now. Could she punch a fist through a brick wall? Shift into animal form like her companions? Fly? It was pretty obvious she couldn’t suddenly run faster, since she was practically staggering along behind John in her efforts to keep up.

At last Grant led them through a thicket of bushes into a grove of trees and stopped. Sherrie bent over, hands on her knees, and gasped for breath. The men weren’t even winded. She sat on the ground, stretching her legs before her and leaning back on her arms. She exhaled a long, ragged breath, wincing at the stitch in her side.

The woods were quiet except for birdsong, the buzz of insects and the rustling of leaves. Sherrie tilted her face up to the shafts of light spearing the canopy overhead. A breeze cooled her sweaty face, making her skin feel stiff from salt and grit.

So, here they were, and somewhere out there was their enemy—a being powerful enough to control peoples’ minds and maybe cause an avalanche. Was she now equally powerful? Sherrie reached out a tentative tendril from her mind, willing the leaves to shake. At that precise moment, the breeze rose and the branch she was staring at swayed, causing the leaves to tremble. Coincidence? Maybe.

She looked over at John, who was taking his shoe off and pouring pieces of gravel from it, and at Grant, who paced the perimeter of the clearing, stopping occasionally to listen. She felt a wave of affection for each of them and a sense that she knew them intimately, although they’d been acquainted such a short time. John’s caring warmth and Grant’s exciting energy were like two sides of a coin—both of them indispensable. You couldn’t spend half a coin. She wanted and needed them both.

“Sit,” she commanded Grant. “Let’s join hands while I try to locate our guy with my mind again.”

Although she made the offer, Sherrie hoped one of them would think of an alternative. She didn’t want to meet this entity again, not in her mind or in person. He had a scary, off-balance vibe she imagined serial killers possessed.

Grant jumped on the suggestion. “That’s a good idea. Clearly you gain some power from joining with Walker and me. Use it to try to find our enemy’s weakness. If we feed you our strength, maybe you can even take him down with your mind.”

Not what she wanted to hear, but even John didn't protest that it was too dangerous. He nodded agreement and scooted closer to take her hand. "Be careful."

Grant gracefully dropped down beside them and seized Sherrie and John's hands. The warmth of his big palm engulfing her hand and John's hard, callused grip on the other made Sherrie feel much more secure. Their union was strong. She could do this.

Sherrie felt like she was on a Tilt-o-Whirl. The world flashed by, too many things she'd thought she knew were turning topsy-turvy, and she was forced to stay on the ride until some cosmic operator turned it off. Exhaling a deep breath, she closed her eyes, attempting to relax and center herself.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Slow the heart rate. Just like in her yoga class. Her instructor Kamala would be proud. Sherrie squeezed her companions' hands and felt their power flow into her. This time her consciousness lifted and separated from her physical body with a natural ease, as if she'd been astral traveling her entire life. Why her? Why not Grant who seemed to have had more experience with this kind of thing? It didn't make sense unless there really was a particular connection between her and this man.

She found and followed the thread that led her to him. The trail was clear as if spray painted with arrows leading her to him. In fact, she almost felt him beckoning her. Did he *want* to be found?

He stood on a ridge of rock near the cave where he dwelled, surveying the land below. Sherrie could see with a cosmic three-hundred-and-sixty-degree gaze where she and the shifters were in relation to him in the physical world. It wasn't very far away.

This time, her image of their enemy was clearer. He wasn't merely a dark and dangerous swirling blackness, but a human man wearing, if she wasn't mistaken, a sweater vest! His hairline was receding and his face was as round-cheeked as a child's. He turned his florid countenance toward her and, sensing her presence, focused on her in his mind.

"Did you send that avalanche down on us? Did you intend to kill us?" she demanded.

"I was only testing you. Finding out if you had untapped talent like I discovered in myself. You're getting stronger. How did you steal the shifters' energy?"

So, he didn't know about the sex that had exploded in a burst of power, shattering the wall of stone. She sidestepped his question and responded to his statement.

"You sound like you know something about me, like you've been expecting me."

"I have. We're related, you and I. Two of a kind. Don't belong in either world."

Sherrie considered his words, turning them over in her mind instead of instantly dismissing them. She'd always felt like an outsider, but figured most people did. It could be hard to find anyone you really connected with. However, he seemed to have something more specific in mind.

"When you say related, do you mean that in the literal sense?"

"You've always wondered who your father was? Well, I have answers for you. Come and see me in person if you want to know the truth. Leave your bodyguards behind."

She felt him turning away from her, shutting her out of his mind, and strove to hold onto his attention. The more information she could gather before facing him, the better. “Who are you? What’s your name?”

He laughed, an eerie sound that echoed inside her head. “What’s in a name?” he quoted. “I call myself Janus right now.”

“And I call myself Sherrie.” She projected the mental equivalent of her million dollar, Miss America smile, which always earned her great tips. “Pleased to meet you, Janus.”

“No, you’re not. You think you’re coming to destroy me. But once you’ve heard what I have to say, you’ll change your mind.”

“Very cryptic. Why don’t you tell me what the big secret is, and if it’s everything you promise, I’ll point my companions in another direction and find my way to you.”

Again the eerie laughter sounded. “I’d like it better if you reverse that. Lose the shifters as proof of your good faith, and then come to me.”

Why did he want to see her in the flesh? He must have some agenda that required her presence. That idea was scary.

“Sorry, Janus. I don’t know you well enough to go on a blind date, and honestly, the fact you’ve put a little girl in a coma doesn’t exactly inspire confidence.”

“Not a girl, a shapeshifter. Don’t let them fool you with their false faces.”

“I have no illusions about what they are,” Sherrie assured him, “but what makes you think they’re evil and deserve to be harmed?”

“That’s all part of my story, which I’d be happy to tell you in person.”

Before she could cajole or bait him with more questions, he cut her off, snipping their connection like cutting a power line—a snap of energy, and the line went dead.

She rushed back along the slender thread to her physical body, entering it with a burst of speed that was like hurtling into a wall. Her eyes snapped open. She blinked and stared at the two faces suspended above hers—one almond-eyed and golden, the other raw-boned and tan.

“Are you all right?” John’s dark brows were drawn together. He reached out and stroked her hair back from her forehead.

“Yeah.”

“Did you find out anything new?” If Grant was in cat form, his tail would be lashing with excitement.

“I learned his name, but I don’t think it’s his real name. He said ‘I call myself Janus’ and claims to have a secret to tell me about my connection to him.”

“Janus, like the Greek god, the gatekeeper in charge of beginnings and endings.” John took her hand and pulled her to a sitting position while Grant offered her a bottle of water.

Sherrie drank deeply then wiped her mouth on the back of her hand. “Janus. Isn’t that the one with two faces? That could mean something. If this man lives somewhere other than a cave in the physical world, he’d show one face to the people around him and keep the other hidden.”

Grant’s hand rested on her leg. John’s pressed against her back, completing the circuit. The low-grade power thrummed among the three of them. Between their touch and the liter of water, her battery had been recharged.

“I don’t understand what special connection we have, but he wants me to go to him without you two. I think I should do it. You could hide nearby and, after I get him talking and distracted, you can rush in and capture him.”

John was already shaking his head. “No way you’re facing him alone.”

“I’m not saying that. You’ll be close, ready to attack. We’ll find a way to subdue him then figure out what has to be done to free the people he’s holding captive.”

“If he’s capable of causing an avalanche, who knows how much power he possesses,” John argued.

“What’s your plan, Walker?” Grant snarled. “Sit back and wait until he’s wiped out both our clans? We have to make some kind of move and soon.”

“I’m merely suggesting a little reconnaissance first. Scope out the area and get a visual on Janus before we send Sherrie in unarmed and with no real plan.”

“Fine. I’ll go ahead.” The panther turned on a dime, conceding the point. “I’m faster. I’ll check him out and report back to you. Maybe I can even take him down without involving Sherrie at all.”

He was already stripping down, ready to shift into animal form. Sherrie had often been told she was impulsive. Grant Perron made her seem unwaveringly stable.

“Wait. I think the three of us should stick together as long as possible,” she protested. “Splitting up now wasn’t what I had in mind. The combination of the three of us seems to be an important part of this. We haven’t even discussed what happened in the ravine.”

“We shared power. And I’m ready to use my share of it.” Grant’s naked body began to shimmer; his face grew long and catlike.

“How do you even know where to go?” she called.

“Fucking cats!” John cursed as Grant loped away. “They never listen and they never plan ahead.”

Sherrie watched the mountain lion’s tawny body bounding from rock to rock as it disappeared up the slope. She shivered, and a feeling of dread filled her. Intuition told her splitting up was the wrong thing to do. Evidently, Grant’s intuition said something else.

Time would prove which of them was right.

Chapter Eight

It felt good to stretch his muscles and push his body to its limit. Grant raced uphill, finding precarious footing on the slippery shale before leaping away as it crumbled beneath him. The usual sense of power he experienced while in animal form was even stronger now, enhanced by the sex he'd shared with Sherrie and Walker. The compounded energy had given him a jolt like a caffeine fix. Now he wanted to use that energy to rend Janus limb from limb. Whatever he was, whoever he was, he was going to pay for what he'd done to Marina and the others.

He counseled himself to use caution. Killing the man before they learned the extent of his power over the individuals in comas was not the plan. But knowing that didn't ease the bloodlust pumping through Grant's veins.

Reaching the top of the ridge, he padded along with his nose to the ground, inhaling all the delicious aromas of the forest. He was starving. The gopher snack earlier hadn't stuck with him, but there wasn't time to hunt now. He could feel his target getting closer. In his subconscious, the dream traveler guided him where he needed to go, his own innate knowledge sending him along the ridge toward the caves that honeycombed this part of the mountain.

Janus's dark aura drew him. Grant wanted to see him face to face, needed to see he was solid and real, a being with a body that could be mauled and shredded. He was so focused on his goal he didn't register his attacker until the other panther leaped on him from its perch on higher ground. Claws raked his back, and teeth dug into his neck before he could twist around to fight. It was a full-blooded wild animal, not a shifter, and therefore smaller than him, but that didn't make its bite any less lethal.

Grant yowled in pain and surprise, a resounding cry that echoed across the valley. He shook his body, trying to dislodge the other cat, but its fangs sank deeper into the back of his neck. The unprovoked attack wasn't natural. This was no fight over hunting grounds. The mountain lions tended to stay out of the shifters' way and vice versa. Grant knew in his gut the panther, like the rockslide, was controlled by Janus.

He rolled onto his back, crushing the other animal's body beneath his. The cat's jaw loosened, and Grant ripped away, leaving a chunk of flesh behind. He twisted and landed on his feet. Claws extended, he leaped toward his opponent. If he could pin the other panther on the ground, his superior weight would hold it no matter how it twisted. Then all he had to do was bite its throat.

The other beast regained its footing, and they came together with a clash of claws and fangs. Grant became one with his animal side as he bit and ripped and growled in rage. They clashed, the smell of blood

and fur rising. Locked in a lethal embrace the two cats rolled over the ground, still snapping and snarling. Jagged stones stabbed Grant, and sharp claws tore into him.

They landed at the edge of a steep drop off with his attacker on top. Jaws open wide, the animal bit down on Grant's throat. Fangs slipped through his thick ruff of fur and punctured his neck.

He shook his head, trying to break the animal's grip again, but the cat clung like a burr. Grant's vision grew hazy and dimmed around the edges. Bested by a common mountain lion? Not going to happen. With a mighty flex of his muscles, Grant twisted and rolled. His opponent loosened its jaws and Grant pulled free again. He slashed with razor sharp claws at the other panther's belly just as the ledge of rock crumbled from beneath him.

Both animals plunged off the side of the mountain, down the steep slope.

John held Sherrie's hand and pulled her up the rock face. "Not much farther to the top."

The hair on his nape prickled at the sense of the dangerous entity nearby. His body felt electrified as if a big thunderstorm was coming. Part of the feeling was the pending confrontation with the unknown enemy and part was the aftermath of the threesome with Sherrie and Perron. Yes, there'd been the purely pleasurable sensations of sex, but also an incredible energy flowing among them, magnified as if each were contributing to it. The power filled him still. How he could use it he had no idea, but it seemed their combined strength might be enough to defeat Janus. Why else would Sherrie have been indicated as the necessary element in their battle against him?

"We're getting close. Can you feel him?" Sherrie panted as they reached the top of the rocks.

John nodded and clasped her hand tighter as he led her into a stand of trees. Through the branches, he glimpsed the dark, open maw of a cave in the side of the mountain. It abruptly dawned on him that he should've brought guns from the sports shop. Coming here unarmed except for some possible mystical powers suddenly seemed like a vastly stupid idea. Maybe he couldn't kill their enemy for fear of hurting his victims, but there was no reason he couldn't take him down with a shot to the leg.

He pulled Sherrie down behind a thick tree trunk. "You stay here while I run ahead and take a look."

"Wait. What?" She grabbed for his hand and held on, stopping him from leaving. "I don't think that's a good idea. We've already lost Grant from him going off half-cocked. I think it's important the three of us stick together."

"That's why I'm not going far. I'll circle around to the other side of the cave where I can get a better view, but I'll be right back."

Before Sherrie could protest again, he tugged free from her grip and trotted through the brush, staying outside the clearing by a good distance. Even in human form he could move through the woods nearly silently, and his hearing was keen enough to catch the slight rustle of a bird flying from branch to branch.

He looked through the green fringe of leaves at the black mouth of the cave. Was this a man or something else? Where had he come from, what was his plan and why had he decided to target shifters?

John heard the snap of a twig a moment before he felt the crackling jangle of lightning enter his body. His body jerked and his brain went numb as electricity fired through him. He spun around to catch a glimpse of his attacker.

You! Recognition crashed over him before another jolt of the taser stole his consciousness and sent him crashing to the ground.

Chapter Nine

Stupid men. Sherrie peered around the trunk of the tree, trying to catch a glimpse of anything other than foliage. The woods were silent except for the tiny rustles of chipmunks or birds and the shrill of tree frogs. A deerfly buzzed around her head and she swatted it, flattening it against her neck with a slap that stung her sweaty flesh.

A little bit ago, she'd heard something large moving through the underbrush some distance away, but the sound had stopped. For the past God knew how many minutes, there'd been no movement. She wished she wore a watch. She wished John would come back. Or Grant. She wished she dared move from this spot and take control of the situation. But the truth was she was afraid.

She was all alone in the wilderness near the cave of a psycho. What if she simply left, went back down the mountain, found her way to the road and hitched to the nearest town *not* inhabited by werewolves? Would that be so wrong? Any sane person would do the same. She was no hero, hadn't asked to be a savior. Perhaps saving herself was the best thing she could do.

But even as the very viable possibility flashed through her mind, she knew she wouldn't abandon John and Grant. She had to find out where this road led and what secret Janus claimed to know about her.

Sherrie rose, took a deep breath and shook off her anxiety as if she was about to walk onstage. She could do this, adopt another persona, perhaps a cross between Indiana Jones and Xena, and march into the jaws of danger with bravery and panache.

Still, it would be nice to have a weapon. She pawed through the backpack and found a jackknife which she slipped into her pocket, then she shouldered the pack and headed through the trees following the path John had taken. There were no broken branches or bent ferns to mark the way, and she soon gave up trying to track him. Instead, she looked toward the mouth of the cavern, keeping it always in sight through the branches as she walked. Her face prickled with sweat, and she wiped away a slick of perspiration on her throat as she slapped a mosquito this time.

Sherrie stopped stock still when she came upon a spot in the woods where the underbrush was flattened. It looked like a fight or worse had taken place here. There was a narrow path where something heavy had been dragged away. Her chest was so tight she could scarcely breathe, and her heart pounded deafeningly in her ears. The path couldn't lead anywhere good, but what was her other option, to wait for one of the men to return and tell her what to do next? She'd never been much good at waiting or at taking directions.

Sherrie followed the path that led straight to the clearing outside the cave entrance and there Janus stood. Their meeting was almost anticlimactic. He didn't raise a weapon to threaten her. No minions rushed to seize her. Suddenly he was simply there in front of her, an average-looking man with thinning brown hair who stood with his hands crossed primly at his groin. He wore a charcoal gray sweater with a snowflake motif, a pair of brown trousers and black boots.

Sherrie fought a ridiculous urge to give him fashion advice about the sweater as she stepped into the clearing and faced her nemesis in the flesh. "Hello."

"You came alone."

"You didn't give me much choice. Where's John?"

"Unharméd and safe. I can't vouch for the other one."

Her stomach did a slow barrel roll at the news—one of her would-be protectors imprisoned, the other one possibly injured or dead.

"Well, I'm here," she said. "What do you want with me? What's your big secret?"

"Come inside, sit down and have some tea." He gestured toward the mouth of the cave. "The place is a bit primitive, but it suits my needs for now."

Sherrie weighed her options. She'd be safer outside the cave with more chance to run away if necessary, but if she went inside she might learn something that would lead her to John. She followed Janus into the darkness.

Beyond the wide opening was a rocky chamber from which several pitch-black holes indicated tunnels leading in various directions. In the center of the space was an incongruous sitting area, a couple of canvas chairs and a camp stove on which a kettle of water steamed.

Janus waved her into one of the chairs. "This is only temporary, a base of operations, so to speak. Someday I'll have a house in the mountains overlooking the entire valley."

"Mm," Sherrie murmured, feeling as surreal as Alice down the rabbit hole. "What would an arch villain be without a lair, right?"

"Not the villain here, Ms. Stoltz." He frowned as he filled a cup with hot water, setting a teabag afloat. "You of all people should understand that. The wolf clan kidnapped you, but I haven't hurt a single human being and never would. Shapeshifters aren't people. I don't feel any qualms about siphoning off some of their power."

Whatever you say, Dr. Evil. "What do you hope to gain from all this, Mr. Janus?"

"I've already gained it—a power source that makes me untouchable and the respect of all shifters."

Sherrie had known plenty of guys with damaged egos, struggling to be heard by the world. They despised those they considered average or inferior, but deep inside it was their self-doubts that made them weak. Plenty of her fellow actors suffered from the syndrome. Janus wanted to "be somebody", and she could work with that by feeding his ego.

“So you’re not one of them, a shapeshifter?” she asked. “Just a regular guy who’s figured out a way to use their energy? That’s amazing. How did you find out about the shifters and how did you discover how to harness their power?”

“Am I one of them?” He laughed bitterly. “There’s a story, and it’s the point where your life intersects with mine. You see, my father was a shifter, but my mother was human. She didn’t know what he was until it was too late. After he revealed his true face to her, he left her. My mother gave birth to me and brought me to the town where he’d told her he was from.”

“Browning,” Sherrie said.

“Yes.” Janus fished the teabag from the water and handed her the cup. “Needless to say my paternal grandparents and the clan weren’t happy about it, but she left me with them and went off to live her own life.”

“I’m sorry,” Sherrie said automatically. “It must have been hard to be raised as an outsider. Did you inherit any of your father’s qualities? Can you shift?”

“No. Can you?” He gazed at her intensely with his dark eyes.

“What are you getting at?” Her heart beat faster, blood surging through her veins. “Are you suggesting my father was...?” She couldn’t even say it. The thought was too preposterous. And yet, she knew absolutely nothing about the man. Her mom hadn’t had any details to share, claiming he was a one-night stand after a bender she’d prefer to forget, an incident in her sordid youth.

“Didn’t you ever feel there was something different about you, Sherrie? Didn’t you ever long for something you couldn’t put your finger on but which you desperately needed? Perhaps a birthright that had been denied you?”

“You’re claiming I’m some kind of half-breed shifter like you.” She pressed the rim of the teacup to her lips, but didn’t drink.

“I’m telling you you’re my half-sister, that we share the same father. My blood recognized yours from the moment we met in our dreams.”

“Really? Because I didn’t get that psychic message. All this is news to me. How did you know my name, by the way? You didn’t get that from a dream.”

“No, but when I’m not up here on the mountain, I live among the wolves in town. I listen. I know what the pack discusses even if I’m not a part of their council. I heard they were going to find you and, once I’d felt you, I stopped fearing your arrival. I understood then that you weren’t going to be the end of me. Instead you were the missing element I’d been waiting for—a blood relative. A bastard shifter like me.”

Sherrie shook her head in denial. The tea sloshed over the rim of the cup and onto her hand, but she scarcely felt the slight burn. A chain reaction of thoughts snapped through her mind like a string of firecrackers. As a little girl, she’d fantasized her father as a movie star, a superhero or a king. When she’d

been angry at her mother, she'd even imagined she'd been stolen from his kingdom by this evil hag intent on ruining her life. But never had she imagined he'd possessed magic powers that might have transmitted to her and never had she imagined her father was half wolf.

Janus might be crazy and evil, but it didn't mean he was lying. Was it possible he was her half-brother, and that her father had been an even more powerful and mysterious figure than she'd dreamed of as a child?

"How do you know this? What kind of proof do you have?"

"I just know. Like I said, I recognized you when I met you in my dreams. Blood recognizes blood. Any shifter can tell you that. And there's enough wolf in me to know my own kin when I meet her."

Sherrie feigned nonchalance. "What is this supposed to mean to me? Do you want a hug? Or do you think we're going to team up—brother and sister superheroes like Dash and Violet?"

At his blank look, she supplied the reference. "*The Incredibles*. It's a movie. Ever heard of it?" She glanced around the rocky walls of the cavern. "No, probably not, because you've been camping out up here like Grizzly Adams."

She couldn't help her snide comments. It was how she always reacted when she was afraid or nervous. But she reminded herself she was supposed to be trying to build a connection to Janus, so she tried to add something more placating.

"I think your plan is ingenious, but I don't quite understand the practical uses. What do you expect to do with all the power you've gained? Do you have a way to store it? What kinds of abilities has it given you? And how did you discover you could siphon energy anyway?"

Janus smiled, a baring of his teeth that showed no mirth or warmth. "I can't share *all* my secrets with you, little sis. Not until I know you believe in me and support me completely. You see, I think if we combine our essences together it will increase our power beyond imagining."

She shivered inside at the idea of "combining essences", wondering if he planned to "combine" in the same way she had with the two shifters.

"What'll we do with this power?" she asked. "How does it translate into a mansion on the hill and a Rolls in the driveway?"

Janus had drained his cup of tea and now he turned the cup in slow circles in his hand. "They say money is power, well, power can be converted into money. After a few flashy demonstrations of the hell we can rain down on them, we'll make demands of the shifters. Demands that involve an offshore bank account and a wire transfer."

"And after you've gotten the money, you'll leave them in peace and go away?" Sherrie set her still full cup on the ground by her camp chair.

"No. I'll stay right here and enjoy the fruits of my labors. Not one of them would ever suspect me, since they think I'm worthless. They've never even noticed me living among them."

“How would you explain your sudden good fortune?”

“Investments, an invention, it doesn’t matter.” He waved an impatient hand, and she realized he hadn’t examined his plan too closely. “The point is I’ll be master over them, pulling their strings like a puppeteer, and they’ll never know it.”

Sherrie wanted to add, “Isn’t the point to earn their recognition at last?” but she forced herself to keep her mouth shut. No need in pointing out the big holes in logic in his evil master plan.

“You can live with me. We’ll both have a family at last. Isn’t that what you’ve always wanted?” He set his cup aside, reached out and rested his hand on her knee, squeezing lightly. “Family?”

He was right about that. Sherrie’d always longed for more than the patchwork life of aborted relationships and sudden moves that had been her pattern. But being family with this guy wasn’t what she’d had in mind.

“Now, it’s my turn to ask you a question.” Janus released her leg and rested his elbows on his knees. “How did you get free when you were trapped in the ravine? You were out of my range so I couldn’t see how you did it.”

Thank God for small favors. Inside, she grimaced at the idea of this creepy little pervert—her brother?—watching the three of them. If he wasn’t already thinking of combining essences with her in that way, she certainly didn’t want to put the idea into his head.

“I don’t know,” Sherrie answered. “It was as if something inside me unlocked, and suddenly I could just do it, suck up their energies like from a straw in a juice box. The rock wall burst apart and we were free.”

He frowned and nodded. “You’ve never been able to do anything like this before, right?”

“No. I was shocked. Trust me.” That much was true. “Were you watching us climb the mountain? Is that how you knew right when to send the avalanche? How did you know you wouldn’t accidentally kill me? That wouldn’t have been very brotherly of you.”

“I wouldn’t say watching, but I’ve been aware of you, which is how I knew the panther went ahead of you so I could intercept him. I’ve been practicing with my newfound powers until I have quite a bit of control over them. Watch.” He sounded so like a kid clamoring for Mommy to watch him dive off the diving board that Sherrie nearly laughed.

Picking up the teacup, he tossed it into the air then raised his hand with his palm open. The cup froze in mid-fall to hang suspended between them. Janus swept his hand and the cup flew across the cave and shattered against the rock wall.

“You see?”

When her thumping heart had stopped choking her, Sherrie flattered him. “Very impressive! What do you have in mind to show the shifters the extent of your power?” *Besides holding their loved ones captive in comas.*

"That depends on you. If you'll join your strength with mine, I bet we could produce an earthquake. Tell them the exact time to expect it so they know it's not a fluke. When we've gotten their attention, we'll deliver our demands."

"I can see you've really thought this through. May I have a little time to do the same? It's a lot to take in all at once—a shifter for a father, a brother I never knew I had, power beyond my wildest dreams. This has been a very long couple of days."

Cautiously, Sherrie rose from the camp chair. Was it possible she could take her leave like a guest who'd come to call on her own volition? Was he confident enough to let her walk away?

Janus rose too. "You don't know how to find your way back down the mountain. Besides, I have a little test for you to perform. A loyalty test, if you will. Come with me."

He beckoned her to follow and led her to one of the two openings in the back of the cave. He leaned to pick up an industrial-sized battery powered lantern from the floor near the tunnel. An image of herself bashing him over the head with a rock danced in Sherrie's mind, but the time wasn't right to make a move. Not yet.

Janus led her into absolute blackness which seemed to suck the light from the lantern in his hand. It was like being wrapped in cotton, the sound diminished and all Sherrie's senses dulled.

"I have one of your companions imprisoned here. You demonstrate to me how you took his essence, and I'll trust you're really on my side."

"I don't know what I did," she protested. "It just sorta happened!"

"Then you're going to have to figure out how like I did. It's not easy to keep the lines open between myself and a dozen different shifters, but I've got it down to an art now." He laughed. "It's kind of like having intravenous tubes from several sources all feeding me what I need, what I've come to crave."

A soul-sucking vampire. So glad I found you, bro. Now what am I going to do to stop you?

Her pulse, which had slowed during their cozy chat over tea, was racing again. He was taking her to John, but how was she going to set him free? She'd have to use her wits, which appeared to have fled her at the moment. She couldn't even think straight, she was so afraid.

Suddenly, Janus stopped and held out an arm to hold her back. Sherrie gasped as she realized if she'd taken another few steps forward she would've fallen into a gaping hole in the ground. The chasm yawned like an open manhole in the street, only somewhat wider in circumference.

"He's down there. Unharmful for now. But he can't be allowed to live. He's seen my face." Janus turned toward her.

In the harsh light of the lantern casting its eerie shadows, his average features turned into a Halloween mask. "You've got to drain him dry."

John raised his pounding head from the ground to focus on beams of light floating above the black pit in which he was imprisoned. Approaching footsteps resounded in the rocky cavern and the steady murmur of a male voice echoed off the walls—Janus. The man John knew as Evan Blake.

He'd known Blake his entire life, had gone to school with the quiet boy and exchanged absent-minded hellos with the equally quiet adult. The grandson of Steve and Amanda Blake, both now deceased, Evan was a teller at the local branch where John did his banking.

Evan was a half-shifter without the ability to tap his animal side, if he even had one. He lived with the pack in Browning, but only on the periphery of the group. John had occasionally thought it must be lonely for Evan, being an outsider. Once or twice over the years, he'd made an effort to invite the guy to a poker party or on a fishing trip, but Blake had never accepted his offers. Now it appeared Evan had latent powers none of them had ever guessed he possessed, and the pack was going to pay for real or imagined slights.

John held his breath and listened as a feminine voice answered Blake. It was Sherrie. The echoes made it difficult to hear the words, but it sounded like she was telling him she couldn't do something he wanted her to do. John's pulse pounded in his ears and the urgent need to protect Sherrie superseded all other thoughts. He was frantic and frustrated by his inability to do anything to help her as the argument escalated.

"I don't believe you." Blake's voice suddenly came from above and light shone down into John's eyes, blinding him after the hours in darkness. "I think you do know how to tap him, and if you're really sincere about teaming with me, you need to prove it."

Without warning, something—a body—blocked the light and fell into the pit. Sherrie tumbled toward John in a crazy, impossible slow motion. Blake must be controlling her fall with his powers. She floated like an oversized feather, arms and legs knocking against the narrow, rocky walls. John barely had time to put his arms up to catch her before she landed on him heavily, knocking them both to the ground.

Far above, Blake leaned over the opening to the shaft and called down, "I'll give you a few hours to think about it. It's not a hard choice. I'm offering you everything. All you have to do is accept my offer and give me a token of good faith."

John gripped Sherrie's body tightly as the light disappeared and their captor's footsteps retreated. He breathed in the scent of her hair, felt her warmth in his arms and her weight pinning him to the ground. "Are you all right?"

"No. Are you?"

John sat up, releasing her so she could catch her breath. He heard her turn toward him although he couldn't see her shape in the total darkness even with his keen vision.

"Did he hurt you?" Her fingers touched his face, felt it as a blind person would, then her hands trailed down his neck and over his chest and arms.

"I'm okay, although my fall was considerably harder than yours." John touched the wound on his head where it had smashed against the rocks. The blood flow had stopped, and a scab was forming. He took Sherrie's hand and held it. "What does he want from you?"

"He claims I'm his long-lost half-sister and that we share the same shifter father—someone from your town apparently—and that together we have the power to control the shifters and make ourselves rich. I guess his happily-ever-after includes us living in a castle on a hill like an incestuous fairytale couple."

John smiled, glad to hear Sherrie hadn't lost her snide sense of humor.

"To prove my loyalty I'm supposed to take your power and share it with him. I told him I don't know how, but he doesn't believe me seeing as we blasted a hole through rock to get out of the ravine."

Suddenly she let go of his hand and plunged against his body, wrapping her arms around him and pressing her face into his chest. "I'm scared. He plans to kill you one way or another because you've seen his face. Who is this guy? Do you know him?"

John quickly told her what he knew about Evan, which wasn't much. "The guy's an enigma. I never would've guessed he was filled with so much bottled-up rage. He just seemed like a nice, quiet guy."

"That's what they always say about serial killers."

He stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head, grateful they were together even under the circumstances. "You tried to come after me. That's how he caught you."

"Well, it seemed pretty stupid to climb all the way to the top of the mountain and not meet the man we'd come to see. Now I know more than I did before. For example, it's not easy for him to keep control over each of the shifters he's draining. From the way he talks he's more interested in making shifters suffer than he is in getting rich, but he has plans for that too. Some half-assed plan about making an earthquake to demonstrate his ability, then demanding money on threat of a worse tragedy. Guy's clearly been watching too many comic book movies without noticing the bad guy always gets beaten."

John rubbed his hand up and down her back. She shifted on his lap and, despite everything, his cock hardened. The erotic connection between them was irresistible. "Maybe we should give the man what he wants."

"Huh?" She sat up straight. "No way."

"The three of us together generated enough power to take out a stone wall. Maybe we should try to build up power and attack Blake, instead of giving him control of the situation."

There was a long silence. He could hear her breathing, magnified in the dark, enclosed space.

"Do you think we can do it, without Grant?" she asked. "Or maybe I can...we can find him on the astral plane. I think I'm getting the hang of this out-of-body travel. Together we could join again and channel the energy better this time."

"It's worth a try. I've never had much of a psychic bent, but that's changing fast. How do you do it—separate from your body?"

“Let’s start with a kiss.” Sherrie leaned in and found his lips in the dark. Hers were soft and moist and tasted slightly of herbal tea. At their touch, John instinctively closed his eyes and opened his mouth. He forgot his thirst and the throbbing pain in his head as he savored her tongue’s slow exploration of his mouth. His cock grew harder, and his need for her swelled, filling his mind and his senses.

Sliding his hand beneath her jacket and shirt, he touched her smooth skin and the bumps of her vertebrae. How he wished they could take time and do it right, somewhere other than in a shack or a cave shaft. He’d like to lay her down on smooth, clean sheets and kiss every inch of her body, slowly bringing her to the edge of orgasm again and again before letting her come. But this wasn’t the time or place for leisurely fucking. They were on a lovemaking mission which included that bastard Perron, if they could reach him. Energy buzzed between them, but it lacked the final element they needed to make it explode.

After several moments, Sherrie pulled away and whispered, “Now, see if you can be with me and separate from your body at the same time. Breathe deeply. Feel yourself lifting up. If you can shift into a wolf, I’m sure you can do this.”

John didn’t really want to. He was perfectly content with feeling her solid body in his arms, her breasts pressed against his chest and her hot tongue in his mouth. Nevertheless, he focused on his breathing and tried to separate consciousness from flesh. After a few seconds, he thought he did feel a difference, a lightness and awareness of being apart from his physical form. The strange sensation made him nervous, but Sherrie was with him in her essential form so he relaxed and went with it.

She took his disembodied hand and pulled him along with her. Together they shot up the narrow shaft and down the tunnel toward the front of the cave where Evan Blake sat in a camp chair. He didn’t seem to be aware of their presence when they flowed past him. His eyes were closed, perhaps focused on his own astral connection to the comatose shifters.

“Come on.” Sherrie’s voice spoke inside John’s mind, and she clung to his hand.

As they sped through the trees, faster than he could run even in wolf form, John caught an unneeded breath. This phenomenon was exhilarating and almost too much to wrap his mind around. The world and his body were every bit as real as their existence in physical form, but everything was slightly skewed. His senses were stronger, his view broader, his mind sharper.

He glanced at Sherrie by his side. Her beautiful face and form were as always, and he could feel her as if she was solid. She seemed to know exactly where she was going so he was happy to let her lead.

They raced through the woods, but branches and brambles passed through them rather than snagging on their hair or clothes.

“Grant’s up ahead,” Sherrie assured John. “Feel him?”

John focused outward, searching for the feline essence of Grant, that arrogant ass, and suddenly he did sense him up ahead. They burst into a clearing, and there the big man lay, drowsing in the sun. Asshole! While they were imprisoned with their lives in danger, he was catnapping.

"Perron, wake up," John shouted.

"He's unconscious, John." Sherrie stooped by the man's side and brushed her fingers through his blond hair. It didn't even ruffle from her invisible fingers. "Grant, can you hear me? We're here. Come out. Come to us."

For a second, John thought Grant was shifting. His body shimmered as if the molecules were vibrating, morphing into their new configuration. Then the man sat up, his essence separating from his corporeal form. Now that John looked more closely at the man's body, he saw it was battle-scarred as if he'd been in a catfight.

Grant opened his eyes and focused on Sherrie and John. "What are you doing here? What happened?"

"You got mauled from the looks of you," John said, indicating the torn body still lying on the ground. "One of your pride?"

Grant rose, grimacing at his damaged physical self. "Naw, a regular mountain lion. I drove it off, but it got in some good bites first. The fall down the hill knocked me out."

"We found Janus. He's holding us both captive," Sherrie explained succinctly. "I think I might know how to end him, but first we need to combine power like we did before."

Perron's brows shot up. "Great. I'm in."

"This isn't for you to get your rocks off. It's for a higher purpose." John despised his prudish tone, but couldn't help it; Perron ruffled his fur. When all this was over, if they were still alive, he'd like nothing better than to get into it with the panther for real, fist to fist, fang and claw. Oddly enough, the idea sent a charge through him that went straight to his dick. His erection stiffened, images of violence and sex mingling in a heady brew.

"Nothing like thoughts of duty to make you horny," the panther teased, but his cock was hard too. John suddenly realized he was naked, as were they. Had they been since they'd left their bodies? Somehow he hadn't noticed. But clothes seemed superfluous here in the astral world where they didn't even have bodies. It certainly made going straight for the sex a lot easier.

"Maybe we don't even need to have sex," Sherrie suggested as she held John's hand again. "It could be more of a spiritual joining and if we simply touch each other—" The moment she linked them by taking Grant's hand, electricity crackled through them. "Jesus!"

John gasped as a tsunami of carnal desire swept through him. There was no way they could fight it. No way some hand-holding and singing "We Shall Overcome" was going to cut it. He needed to fuck someone, either one of them, and he needed it now!

Chapter Ten

When Sherrie took his hand, a ripple of bliss went through Grant as if someone had stroked his fur. He couldn't suppress a purr. Arching his back in pleasure, he brought her hand to his chest and pressed her palm against it, then bent and kissed her luscious lips. The taste of her and the feel of her soft mouth yielding to his made his cock hard as rebar. In an instant, he was starving for her as if he hadn't just fucked her earlier that day—and the night before. Sherrie gave a soft whimper, and his dick throbbed painfully.

Damn, what was it about this woman? He'd enjoyed many partners both female and male and had even had a sporadic relationship of sorts with Marina, but he'd never experienced anything like his animal attraction to Sherrie.

Grant slid his hand up her arm to her shoulder then caressed the length of her back, coming to rest on the swell of her buttocks. Every inch of her flesh felt as real as its physical counterpart—more so because the sensations were beyond the physical. He was receiving the very essence of her being, the particular vibration that was her, and it was sweeter than honey, warmer than sunlight.

As the wolf moved closer to Sherrie, Grant felt his skin against the back of his hand. Was that his hipbone or his cock? Grant reached to find out and encountered wiry pubic hair and the other man's rigid shaft. He curled his fingers around it and stroked.

Walker gave a small grunt of surprise or protest or maybe arousal. Still plumbing the depths of Sherrie's mouth with his tongue, Grant pumped Walker's cock with his fist. He loved the feeling of the other man's arousal, a mirror image of his own. Pulling on the other man's cock was almost like stroking himself. Grant thrust into Sherrie's soft belly, seeking some relief for his aching erection.

Sherrie slid her hand from his chest to his groin and took him in her hand. She gripped him hard the way he liked and glided her hand up and down his shaft. Grant thrust into her encircling fist and groaned with pleasure.

He tore his mouth from hers and moved his lips to her throat. She tasted like joy and he recognized her nature as basically happy. Here in the astral realm, her essence glowed golden, incandescent. Grant swirled his tongue in the soft dip above her clavicle where her pulse pounded, loving the feeling of all that lifeblood surging through her veins. Stooping lower, he latched onto her tit, drawing one beautiful pink nipple into his mouth. He forgot entirely about rubbing Walker's cock and a moment later it slipped from his hand.

The other shifter moved around to Sherrie's front and he bent to take her other breast into his mouth, suckling side by side with Grant. She thrust her chest toward them, whimpering in delight. Her hand curved around the back of Grant's head. He glanced over to see the fingers of her other hand threaded through Walker's dark hair, holding him to her chest.

"Oh, God, so beautiful. So much." Her words in his head were nearly incoherent, but their intent was clear. She was enraptured by the sight of them both sucking on her tits, thrilled by the feeling of their hands caressing her back, buttocks and belly.

After several moments, Grant let her hardened nipple slip from his mouth and surrendered the territory of her breasts to John while he moved farther south. He kissed and licked his way down her stomach and the soft skin of her groin.

Kissing a path around her trimmed tuft of toffee-colored hair, he nuzzled between her thighs and breathed deeply. The catnip of her pussy drew him. He lapped her juices and flicked his tongue lightly over her clit until she jerked against his mouth.

The pleasure of sex would have been enough, whether in the astral or physical world, but this was far more than a simple threesome. Whatever was percolating among the three of them was building a powerful head of steam.

He didn't want Sherrie to come yet and knew she was close to it if he kept working her clit so he gripped Sherrie's hips and burrowed his face farther between her legs. He probed his tongue inside her, stroking as deeply as he could and tasting the ambrosia of her juices. Even with her thighs half covering his ears, he heard her loud groan. The sound pushed him over. He couldn't wait any longer. He had to be inside her. Standing upright, he moved behind her and let his cock rest in the groove between her cheeks.

Over her shoulder he met Walker's gaze as the man glanced up at him. His mouth was still wrapped around Sherrie's nipple. Grant brushed her hair aside, kissed her neck and sucked her earlobe.

"You like this?" he whispered, making his voice huskier, his words seductively harsh. "You like being the center of attention? Why don't you get down on your hands and knees and suck off Walker while I fuck you from behind?"

Sherrie whimpered and nodded. Walker pulled away from her tits and she got on her hands and knees in front of him. Her submissive position was so arousing Grant felt ready to come merely from looking at her. He dropped to his knees behind her and grasped her waist in his hands. Her rear tilted saucily toward him. Another bolt of desire shot through him like lightning.

John knelt facing Sherrie and held his erection to her lips. His jaw clenched tight and he watched with a feverish gaze as she sucked him into her mouth.

Grant guided his cock to her pussy and sank into her. Heat and wetness surrounded him like a humid summer afternoon, and he groaned in satisfaction. He grasped her hips, pulled out and thrust again, his

groin slapping against her ass. Again, apart from the pure pleasure of fucking, power spread through all of them, compounding and growing.

“Give it to me. Give it all to me.” Sherrie’s voice sounded in his head, urging him on, and he obeyed, moving faster, filling her harder while the storm within him mounted.

Grant glanced at Walker only a few feet from him across the span of Sherrie’s arching back and bobbing head. The other man’s expression was blissful. His lips were slack and the dark sweep of his eyelashes fanned against his cheeks. He was hot, sexy, desirable. Grant leaned forward and fastened his mouth over his moist lips in a soul-sucking kiss.

The circuit was complete. Energy arched through them, binding them together. The charge was almost painful, but no more so than shifting, and the elation was mind-blowing. Grant groaned into the other man’s mouth, but didn’t stop kissing him as he pumped furiously into Sherrie.

“Now. Give it to me now.” The command filled Grant’s mind and his climax rushed through his body. A burst of light filled him—filled all of them—and exploded like a star gone supernova.

Sherrie moaned as she swallowed John’s cock even deeper and felt Grant bury himself inside her. She clenched around his thickness, her muscles gripping him hard. His body quaked as he released. Simultaneously John jerked and warm fluid gushed in the back of her throat. Power spun around and through them like an out of control Tilt-o-Whirl. She tried to seize and contain that energy even while her own climax threatened to spin her away.

This must be what being caught in a flash flood is like. She held onto her consciousness as if it was flotsam floating by. Somehow she must harness this powerful flood, hold it inside her and find a way to direct it at Janus.

Her companions were finished, spent and sagging. John withdrew first, his cock sliding from her mouth. He sat back on his heels, and Sherrie wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Grant pulled out next, affectionately patting her bottom before moving away. She was empty once more.

But not empty. She was full of the crazy energy she’d yet to expend. Suddenly, as if a cartoon light bulb had gone off over her head, Sherrie knew what she should do. Rising to her feet, she looked down at John and Grant on either side of her, both panting although their astral forms had no need for air.

She extended her hand to John. “It’s time to go back. I have a plan.”

He looked up, still gasping. “Yeah?”

She turned to Grant. “Get your physical body woken up and head for the cave. Wait outside until I give you a signal. Don’t interrupt me with Janus—or Evan, whatever his name is—no matter what happens unless I call for you, okay?”

Grant frowned, clearly not liking her handing out orders. “What are you going to do?”

“My new ‘brother’ wants me to share power? I’m gonna give it to him.”

"Hold on a second." John rose to his feet. "You can't just rush into this. Tell us exactly what you have in mind."

"No time. I don't want to lose this charge of power, and we still have to get back to the cave. Trust me. I know what I'm doing." *I hope.*

Grant gave a disgruntled snort, but he was already obeying orders, settling back into his physical self. His eyes opened and he sat up as Sherrie took hold of John's hand and turned to go.

John stopped her with a hand cupping her face and looked into her eyes. "Be careful. Don't take any unnecessary risks."

"I won't. I promise. I don't want anything bad to happen to me anymore than you do. But now we've got to fly."

She gave him a quick kiss on the lips, grasped his hand again and pulled him with her. They raced with lightning speed back through the forest, into the cave, past Evan and down the shaft to where their bodies lay twined together.

Entering her physical form with a jolt, Sherrie gasped and her eyes flew open. The darkness, through which she'd been able to see in her other form, was pitch black again. It was like being in a rocky womb. She clung to John, running her hands over his solid form, clothed once more, and holding his face between her palms. The stubble of his jaw scraped her skin.

"Hey, are you with me?" she whispered.

"Mm," he grunted. "Feels like I'm caked in mud."

She knew what he meant. Her body was constricting too, after the freedom of being weightless and buoyant in astral space.

"What I want you to do is play dead or at least unconscious. I'm going to get Blake to believe I've zapped your energy. After he gets me out of here, I'll show him just how much power I've got."

"You have to be careful. He holds a lot of lives besides ours in his hands."

"I know. I can't explain it, but suddenly I *know* exactly what to do, how to play this. Trust me." She pressed a fierce kiss to his mouth and hugged him tight, praying everything would go the way she hoped and this wouldn't be the last time she held or kissed him.

After she pulled away, John whispered, "I'm so sorry I dragged you into all this. Be careful. If anything happened to you, I'd—"

"Shh. It's okay." She pressed her hand against his chest and felt his racing heart. "Now lie down."

John slumped on the ground, slowing his breathing until it was barely audible. Sherrie squeezed his hand once before calling for Blake.

"Hey, come here! I did it. Let me out."

Her heart pounding as hard as John's, she waited for the bobbing light and the sound of their captor's voice. Her skin itched, every hair standing on end as adrenaline and potent energy coursed through her

body. This was it, make or break time. Either her plan would work or she'd put herself and the shifters in even greater danger. But, hell, it couldn't get much worse than being imprisoned in a cave and threatened with death.

As she saw light approaching, Sherrie did a quick deep breathing exercise to clear her mind and practiced what she was going to say. Her role was an easy one to play since she actually was excited, but for different reasons than she was about to give to Evan Blake.

The light shone down the shaft, blinding her. She shielded her eyes and peered up the tube of damp rock.

"I did it! You were right. I could do it all along. I just wasn't aware of it." She laughed, a little hysterically. "God, the way this feels! So much energy coursing through me I don't know what to do with it. This is fucking amazing."

"Walker is dead?" Blake's voice echoed down the shaft.

"No. He's still breathing, but barely. I'm letting him live so I can continue to use him. *Goddamn* this feels like...wow!"

"I know." She heard the smile in his voice, the eagerness of a lonely man to share his secret life with someone at last.

"So why don't you get me out of here and we'll talk?"

"Not so fast. How do I know you won't turn your new power against me?"

"You don't. You'll just have to trust that I forgive you for throwing me down here and testing me like this. Besides, what am I gonna do? I've got a little power, but you're still way stronger than me. If you're really my brother, I want to sit down face to face and talk about what all this means, about what we're going to do."

There was a long pause. She held her breath, waiting for his decision. Would his need for companionship, for an ally to share his vision, outweigh the good sense that warned him not to trust her? He'd made it clear he wanted some kind of relationship, a kinship he'd never had before. Well, he couldn't have that if he left her here to rot. She simply had to earn his trust.

"Evan," she prompted gently in a soft voice. "I know that's your real name. The shifter told me." She purposely didn't call John by name, demonstrating that she was distancing herself from seeing him as a person. "I understand how hard it must have been for you living among them, always alone. I understand because I've always been alone too, just faking fitting in."

That part wasn't far from the truth so it was easy to inject conviction into her voice. She waited again, listening, but still Blake didn't say anything.

"Listen, this was your idea. You wanted to share our power and be like family. So why won't you trust me now? What good am I to you down here?"

She felt her accrued power swirling around inside her, charging through her cells like a herd of wild mustangs. If she released it, she could probably lift herself out of this pit, but it might not leave her with enough juice to defeat Blake so she patiently waited.

Suddenly she felt her body begin to rise, ascending on the air like it was weightless. It felt the same as when she traveled in her astral form, except her bulky body was dragging along with her. The light grew brighter as she neared the mouth of the shaft then she was out and settling gently on her feet on the rocky ground.

She looked at Evan Blake, careful to make eye contact and not allow her gaze to dodge away. Reaching out, she offered her hand to him. He lowered the flashlight so the beam wasn't shining in her eyes and took her hand. Sherrie let just a trickle of energy flow through her fingertips into him. He gasped and stiffened as it entered him.

She smiled. "You were right. We can have anything...everything we ever dreamed of. There's nothing to stop us."

Hand in hand, they walked out of the cavern toward the mouth of the cave. The sunlight shone into the wide opening, burnishing everything a molten gold. It was late afternoon. Unbelievable that the trek up the mountain and everything that followed had transpired in a day's time. She hoped Grant was out there waiting for her signal to come rushing in. She was afraid she'd need some muscle to complete her plan.

Sherrie was too wired to sit. She paced and gestured as she talked. "How did you find out about your ability? I mean, you lived with the shifters all this time. What changed?"

Evan set down the flashlight and folded his arms. "It was the afternoon I had an argument with Phil Pendergast about my car. He charged me for working on it when he hadn't fixed the problem. I was pissed off, and something inside me just...shifted, like a piece of ice breaking off an iceberg and floating away. I could see him and myself from outside my body, and I could see how weak he really was. I reached inside his mind and found him—the real him, his essence beyond man or wolf. I took hold of it and started squeezing like I could choke the breath out of something that has no breath.

"But then a strange thing happened. I felt his energy flowing into me, all that strong, powerful energy shapeshifters use to change from one form to another. It was like shooting heroin. I wanted to suck it all up, drain him dry, but I stopped myself. Instead, I walked away from Pendergast's shop, leaving him sprawled on the floor. No one had seen me stop by and no one connected his sudden mysterious coma to me."

Sherrie nodded. "No one even suspected you, so you could pick another one any time you wanted."

"Not everyone. I found it depended on how strong they were mentally. Some were like trying to blast through a brick wall. And, of course, I had to have an opportunity to come across them alone, somewhere isolated where I wouldn't be seen. After a while, I thought I'd spend part of my time up here on the mountain and try to tap some of the other shifters—see what panther power tasted like." He smiled. "I

learned each individual had a different potency, a different flavor, if you will. The panthers were stronger and even more of a challenge, but my ability was growing.”

“And now there’s you and me together to take ’em all down.” Sherrie stopped pacing and moved close to him. Drawing a deep breath, she took his hands. “Together, but *not* like brother and sister.”

She rubbed her thumbs over the backs of his hands. “To share power, we need a connection that’s stronger than a mere touch. We need to get closer.” She met his gaze with half-lidded eyes, leaving him no doubt about her meaning.

Evan’s eyes widened and his lips parted. She guessed he’d wanted this but hadn’t imagined it would come so easily. The quickest way to put him off balance and steal inside his mind was to distract him with sex. Not that she intended to go all the way. She hoped to have her mission accomplished with only a kiss.

Sliding her hands up his arms, she hooked them over his shoulders and peered deep into his eyes. The striations of his irises were a dark navy against pale green. His pupils dilated and his breathing quickened.

“Like this,” she whispered and leaned in to cover his mouth with hers.

She cast her mind like a fishing line, sending filaments of her consciousness into his mind and exploring the unfamiliar space. Evan was in there, but seemed unaware of her presence in his head. He was too intent on the physical stimulation of her kiss.

She “saw” the dark and scary corners of his attic, the memories of every past slight and hurt he’d ever suffered. They haunted him like ghosts he refused to banish. She saw him as a child, teased, beaten up or ignored by the other kids in the pack he could never be a part of. Fear and jealousy warred within him all the time. He wanted to be a full-blooded member of the pack with every particle of his being, and since they didn’t welcome him in, he wanted them all to suffer.

Scanning his mind was like walking across rotting carcasses—disgusting and heart-wrenching at the same time. But Sherrie wasn’t here for a tour of his psyche. Her mission was to find and sever his connections to the comatose shifters.

Physically, she felt Evan’s hands steal around her back as he pressed his body against hers. His erection grew between them, nudging against her belly. Mentally, she saw the glowing lifelines to the shifters like radioactive tentacles spreading out from him in many directions. That was how her mind decoded the images, but it was much more indefinable than that. She saw the people to whom the lifelines belonged. They slept far away in beds in many places while energy pumped out of them like blood from a severed artery.

Could she cut the connections without hurting the sleepers? Would they regain consciousness once their energy was restored? Sherrie didn’t have time to ponder those questions. Any second Blake would realize she was rattling around inside his mind. A kiss couldn’t distract him forever.

In the physical world, he pulled away from her to draw a breath. Sherrie opened her eyes and looked into his flushed face. "And that was just a kiss. Now for a little power exchange. If you show me yours, I'll show you mine."

She smiled and leaned into him again. This time, she allowed the combined energies swirling inside her to slide into his mouth along with her tongue. She roared in like a strong wind, filling him, shaking him, battering his senses. While he was assaulted by the gale-force of her energy, she seized one of the tenuous threads and broke the connection between Blake and one of the wolf shifters. She tossed the lifeline like the mooring rope of a ship back onto its own deck. The slender line of energy whipped away and disappeared.

One by one, she severed the strands. At the same time, Blake became conscious of the loss of his energy sources. His body went rigid in her arms. He grabbed her shoulders and thrust her away from him, breaking off the deep kiss.

Inside his mind, Sherrie hurried to the next victim's line. Before she could break the connection, a powerful force shoved her away. Big and black and whirling like a tornado, Janus's evil god face was revealed.

"What are you doing?" Rage, betrayal, pain thundered through her.

She instinctively retreated from the assault, withdrawing toward her own body. But she knew if she left his mind she might not get a chance to reenter it, and she hadn't saved Liberty yet. She pushed back, punching a metaphysical fist through the blockade that stopped her from reaching the last of the lifelines. She wouldn't let Janus have Liberty. He was probably drawing hard on his remaining energy sources. He'd kill them before he'd let her free them.

Janus threw Sherrie's physical body across the cave into a wall of rock. She cried out as she hit the stone, and sharp pain lanced through her back before she fell to the ground. Her concentration jolted from her mission, and her consciousness withdrew into her body, losing its foothold in Janus's mind. Far away, echoing from the depths of the cave, came the eerie sound of a wolf's howl.

Sherrie dragged herself to her feet and collected her concentration. The power of three still charged her. This man couldn't beat her down. She gathered all her strength and sent a renewed wave of energy rolling at Janus just as he ran toward her. He stopped and fell back as if he'd hit an invisible wall then he raised his arm and hurled another bolt at her.

The energy lifted her and slammed her against the rock again. Sherrie could swear she heard the back of her skull crunching. The pain was so intense she couldn't even scream. Blackness filled her vision, and she blinked it away. This was no time to lose consciousness.

This time her body didn't drop to the ground. Janus held her pinned to the rock by the power emanating from his upraised palm. "Betrayed me! You liar, I'll kill you." Black thoughts swirled from his mind into hers like a cloud of angry wasps, stinging with raging hatred.

She fended them off as best she could, striving to repel his fury with positive thoughts. “Sorry. Couldn’t let you kill people. Nothing personal,” she beamed back at him. “Let me go and we’ll work it out somehow. I know you’re not a bad person at heart.”

But an invisible hand clenched around her throat, crushing her larynx, stopping her breath. She pushed back against him with all her might and felt the balance of power shift just a little, enough for her to draw a breath.

Then, suddenly, everything changed. A tawny streak bounded into the cave and leaped on Janus, driving him down to the floor. Grant, in panther form, pinned the man to the ground, his huge paws holding down his shoulders and legs while he snarled into his face.

“Don’t kill him!” Sherrie screamed aloud and inside. “He still has hostages.”

The power she’d accrued from John and Grant was fading fast. She felt disoriented from the blow to her head, and her body was so weak she didn’t even try to drag herself from the ground. Instead, she focused every bit of strength and willpower she had left into reentering Janus’s mind while he was distracted by the growling beast at his throat.

She pushed through the barrier he’d thrown up to block her and searched for the remaining lifelines she hadn’t had a chance to cut free. There’d been eight before. There were only four glowing lines now. She could only assume he’d drained the others dry, leaving lifeless bodies behind.

Quickly she disconnected each precious thread and watched them zip away like the broken line of a flying kite. All Evan’s external power sources were gone. Without them propping him up, he wielded no real strength of his own. Janus was once more Evan Blake, a lonely man who walked through life feeling the world owed him more than what he’d been given.

Sherrie faced him in the dark, cluttered space inside his head. Blake’s presence was still a seething mass of impotent rage, coiled and ready to lash out at her.

“You did this to yourself,” she said. “If you’re unhappy, it’s because you’ve made yourself that way. You can’t blame the shifters or anyone else for the life you’ve chosen to live.”

“Liar. Bitch. I should never have trusted you.”

“I’ll try to help you, to convince Grant not to kill you, but you have to swear you’ll never try anything like this again.”

A wordless roar of despair and rage was her only answer.

There was nothing she could do for him. Sherrie withdrew from his dark prison, leaving him to rant and bellow alone.

She pulled back into her own aching body. Grabbing hold of the rocky wall, she dragged herself to her feet. Grant was still slavering over the prone man, and she realized only seconds had passed.

“Don’t,” she urged. “You can’t just kill him. He should have some kind of trial.”

The big cat turned his sleek head toward her, golden eyes shining in the semi-darkness. His angry yowl resounded off the stone walls, and he bared his huge fangs but stepped off of Blake. In the distance, John's quiet howl replied, as haunting as a cemetery at midnight.

Settling on his haunches, the panther shimmered and twisted, morphing back into Grant. The first words out of his mouth were, "He's dangerous. I should put him down."

Sherrie continued to advocate for the man who may or may not be her blood relation. "It's not right. Besides, there might be some questions the shifters want to ask him. Find something to tie him up with then let's get John out of the pit."

Grant suddenly grinned, his surliness disappearing. "Do we have to? Couldn't we leave him awhile?"

Chapter Eleven

“We’re not going to cover this ground again. Our law prohibits executions, no exceptions. All we can do is banish him from our territory.” Pack leader Robert St. Claire spread his hands and shrugged. “But if Blake returns, all bets are off.”

A low murmur went around the room, sounding mostly like agreement this time. The angry dissenters like Brian Cox had finally adjusted to the fact they weren’t going to get the death they’d demanded. Once the Council had made a decision, pack members conceded to it.

John just wanted the village meeting to be over. He was exhausted, starving, filthy and anxious to see Sherrie, who was waiting at his house. He’d been requested to tell, first at the Council meeting then at the town hall meeting, the sequence of events that had led to Evan’s capture. John had omitted exactly what the union of their threesome had entailed. No one needed to know that much detail. Enough to say they’d joined their power and Sherrie had used it to free the hostages from Evan Blake.

Some had suggested she might be a threat to them. John assured them Sherrie had no intention of harming the pack, despite the fact she’d been kidnapped and brought here against her will. It was all he could do to restrain his temper at some pack members’ narrow-minded exclusivity. They didn’t see that their actions were part of what had driven a man like Evan to feel so isolated he attacked them. Not that Blake’s behavior was excusable in any way.

At last it seemed the meeting was winding down as St. Claire delivered one of his rambling monologues about pack unity. He finally ran out of steam and adjourned the meeting. People shuffled from the rows of seats to cluster in the aisles and block the flow of traffic. Warily, John nudged his way toward the door, accepting congratulations and pats on the back and fending off longer conversations.

The door was in sight. He was almost free when a voice spoke behind him. “Walker, hold on.”

He turned to face Brian Cox, who approached him with his hand extended.

“I want to thank you for what you did for Liberty. She’s doing better already. Lydia’s home with her, but she asked me to thank you too.”

John shook his hand, but reminded him, “You owe your thanks to Sherrie. She’s the one who saved your girl and all the others.”

Cox nodded. “I was wrong to dismiss her just because she’s human. Please pass our gratitude along to her as well. As a matter of fact, why don’t you bring her by the house before she leaves town. I know Lydia and Liberty would both like to see her.”

"I will. Now, if you'll excuse me, I really need to go home and crash. It's been an intense couple of days."

John walked outside, blinking in the bright light of mid-morning. It took him by surprise, seemed like it should be twilight. His inner clock was fucked up from staying awake for almost three days straight.

It had been past midnight by the time Grant and Sherrie had knotted their clothing together and lifted John up the shaft then trekked all the way to the Blazer with their prisoner. Evan Blake had remained mute and stone-faced on the drive to Browning, which had taken another few hours. He continued his stoic silence during the trial before the Council members.

After they'd incarcerated him, the leaders had called a pack meeting in the Town Hall. Since neither Grant nor Sherrie were pack members, they'd been excluded. In the early hours of morning, John had given Sherrie directions to his house only a few blocks away and watched while Grant escorted her down the street. Reluctantly, he'd turned and entered the Town Hall to tell his tale once more for the assembled village. Heated discussion of how their prisoner should be dealt with had followed, but, as usual, the Council's word was law and everyone eventually bowed to it.

Now, as John walked home, he couldn't wait to take a shower and fall into bed...with Sherrie. He wished he could have her to himself, but imagined he'd find her curled up in his bed with Grant. The thought made his hackles rise.

Their threesome had been necessary, and if he was going to be honest, he'd been turned on by the panther's deep kiss. But he sure as hell didn't want to share Sherrie with him on a regular basis. If she was even his to share. His gut told him they were meant to be mated, but that didn't mean she felt the same way. Maybe she wouldn't want to stay with him. Maybe he was completely nuts and jumping the gun by thinking of her as his.

When he reached home, the front door was unlocked as always. One of the perks of living in Browning was the practically nonexistent crime rate. Perron wasn't sleeping on the couch, and John's heart dropped as he walked back to the bedroom, expecting to find the pair of them together.

He pushed open the door. The blinds were drawn. Only a little light crept in around the edges, but it was enough to see that only one person occupied the bed. Sherrie slept naked with the covers pooled around her hips and one arm flung above her head. A gentle snore issued from her parted lips.

John stared at the delectable sight of her breasts rising and falling with every breath, her brown hair tumbled across the pillow. He wouldn't have thought he had enough energy left to raise another erection, but his cock evidently had more resiliency than he did as it sprang to attention. He didn't spare a thought about where Perron had gone as he stripped off his clothes and climbed beneath the covers beside Sherrie's soft, sleepy body. He sank gratefully into the mattress and wrapped his arm around her.

Sherrie snorted and her mouth snapped shut. She made a small grumbling sound of annoyance and rolled onto her side. John snuggled against her backside and pressed a kiss to her shoulder. She smelled of

his shampoo and soap, and her hair was still a little damp. He probably should've grabbed a shower too, before lying down, but he was too damn tired.

A moment later, Sherrie shifted in his arms and pressed her bottom against his erection. "You're back," she murmured. "How'd it go?"

"Banishment. That's the worst punishment we have, sending someone away from the pack. I don't know if it's much of a punishment for Blake, but that's what they decided. If he's ever seen in our territory again, he'll be hunted and killed."

"Sounds fair, but creepy having him still out there somewhere." She glanced over her shoulder at him. "If you could've seen inside his mind, it was a scary place."

"I worry that he might try to come after you when you go home. Maybe you should stay here awhile."

She rolled onto her back and looked into his face. A smile curved her lips. "Is this your way of asking me to live with you? John, we barely know each other."

He ducked his head, feeling like a fool. "I know, but I want you to stay. Not because of Blake, but because I like you. I feel..."

"...a connection," she said in unison with him. "Me, too, as crazy as it sounds. And it's not about the sex or the power-sharing. It's something more."

"We call it the mating bond. I never much bought into the idea before, but this has hit me upside the head like a baseball bat."

Her smile broadened to a grin and she reached up to touch the side of his face. "How romantic."

"Will you stay? See how you like living in Browning?" Her mouth was drawing him like a magnet. He couldn't drag his gaze from it.

Sherrie bit her lower lip as though considering. "Got any diners in town? I may be only a mediocre actress, but I'm a helluva waitress."

He dipped his face toward hers and latched onto her mouth, tasting minty-sweet toothpaste, then he pulled away and answered. "Considering you saved our people, I think you can have about any job in town you want. We all owe you."

"Naw. It took all three of us." She curved her hand around the back of his neck and kissed him again, slowly, tenderly. "By the way, Grant's gone home. He wanted to check on his people. Says he'll drop by sometime for a visit."

"Mm."

"You don't like him much, do you?"

He shrugged. "Not just him. Panthers make me twitchy."

"And maybe just a little bit horny?" she teased. "Come on. Admit it."

He shut her up with another kiss, long and lingering this time. When he pulled away at last, she sighed.

"I'll have to go back and say goodbye to some friends, quit my job and break the lease on my apartment, but yeah, I think I'd love to stay here with you."

Warmth of a different kind than that percolating in his groin flooded through John, and his heart lifted. "Good."

After giving her one last kiss, he groaned and sat up. "I've got to get cleaned up. I'll be back."

"Need help in the shower?" Sherrie pushed up on her elbows, which thrust her breasts out before her, the nipples pointing enticingly.

He feasted on the luscious sight of her sprawled across his bed. "If you want to."

"Oh, yeah, I want to." She tossed back the covers and sprang up.

Suddenly he didn't feel nearly as exhausted as he led her into the bathroom and turned on the water. They stood together beneath the hard spray, enjoying the heat and warmth for a few moments, then she picked up the shampoo and squirted a dollop on her palm.

John bowed his head so she could wash his hair. He closed his eyes and let the water stream across his face, while she lathered and massaged his scalp. He nearly whined in pleasure at her gentle touch. When she was finished rinsing the shampoo from his hair, she picked up the bath mitt, applied gel to it and began to soap his body.

"You're so sweet," he murmured as he submitted to her care.

"My pleasure."

She scrubbed his back and buttocks, his shoulders, arms and chest, and lingered on his abdomen and groin. Her hair hung in dark, dripping curtains on either side of her face, and water rolled down her cheeks like tears as she stood beneath the showerhead and lathered his cock. He remembered how she'd looked on hands and knees, her head bobbing as she sucked him off, so sexy. And Grant thrusting his hips against her ass then suddenly leaning in, curling a hand around John's neck and kissing him. His mouth tingled at the memory of that hard kiss, different from a woman's—or at least any of the women he'd been with—aggressive, demanding.

John swallowed and groaned softly. Sherrie continued sliding her hand up and down his shaft, and the tension built in his groin. He watched her face, loving her sweetness and her strength. She'd been through a rollercoaster of events and emotions over the past few days and had taken them all in stride when many people would've broken down. He admired her practicality and her composure. And right now, he simply loved what she was doing with her hands which glided slickly over his shaft.

Her stroking brought him abruptly to the edge. His climax surged through him. He thrust and released, spilling over her closed fist, and the water washed the evidence of his orgasm away.

"Thank you," he groaned, pulling her close to him again. He turned them so the water pummeled her back. Sherrie turned her face into his chest and his chin rested on top of her head as he rocked her slightly from side to side.

Suddenly, a quiver went through her. She was trembling in his embrace, wrapping her arms tight around him and squeezing. He realized she was crying.

“Sh,” he soothed, kissing the top of her head and stroking her back.

Sobs wracked her body as she clung to him, and she forced out a few jerky words. “I-I’m sorry. It’s...just...”

“I know. I know. It’s all too much, and you’re overwhelmed.”

“Yeah,” she whimpered. “And at the same time I’m so damn happy to be here with you. It’s horrible that all this happened, but if it hadn’t, I wouldn’t have met you.”

She lifted her face and gazed up at him, her eyelashes spiked in damp clusters. “Also, I feel bad about Evan. I want to know if he really is my brother, if what he said about my father is true. If it is, even my mom didn’t know. Or maybe she did, but she never told me. There’s just so much to think about, and I’ll never have the chance to find out because I won’t see Evan again. Even if I did, he’d probably try to kill me. I wish I could’ve had a DNA test done or something. I wish there was some way I could know the truth, even though it doesn’t really matter. I mean, I’ve been without a dad all my life, so why is it suddenly important to me now?”

She drew a rough, hiccupping breath, and her mouth trembled before she buried her face against his chest again and another bout of sobs shook her.

“I’m so sorry.” John felt helpless spouting useless platitudes and rubbing her back. He couldn’t do anything to fix things or help her be any less upset. “I wish I could find out for you.”

A thought suddenly occurred to him. “Maybe there is a way. Our psychic, Anna. Sometimes she only catches glimpses of things, but other times—like with pointing you out as our savior—her visions are very specific. Perhaps she can see something about you, an aura that will tell whether your father was George Blake or not.”

“Is that his name?” She looked up at him again. “Is he even still alive, does anyone know? According to Evan, the grandparents who raised him are dead now, so I can’t ask them any questions.”

“I don’t think anyone knows, but we’ll try to find out. I’ll do anything I can to help you learn what you want to know.” He turned off the water, opened the door and got a towel which he wrapped around Sherrie’s shoulders. Then he grabbed one for himself, briskly drying his hair and body.

When they were both dry and snug in bed again, John resumed his train of thought. “We’ll figure out your family history together and try to learn what powers you possess. If your dad really is a shifter, you could have more latent abilities.”

“Thank you,” Sherrie said. “I’m sorry for being such a Weepy Wilma. It’s not like me.”

“You have every right to be upset. Hell, most people would be curled up in a fetal position whimpering by now. I think you’re amazingly strong.”

“Really?” Her smile was almost shy...and delightful. John looked forward to learning all her smiles.

Chapter Twelve

Grant paused to lick his torn shoulder before loping the last hundred yards to Marina's cabin in the clearing. His body ached from whiskers to tail, but he had to see her in the flesh before he rested. On the front porch of the house, he shifted to human form. Giving only a quick rap on the door, he entered.

The place was dark, the windows letting in little of the late afternoon sunlight. He strode through the room to Marina's bedroom, again giving only a perfunctory tap before opening the door.

She lay in bed, face pale and eyes closed just the way he'd last seen her. Sonia Taylor, Marina's nearest neighbor who lived about ten miles away, sat beside the bed reading a mystery novel. She glanced up at Grant and took off her reading glasses.

"She's better," the woman announced without waiting for his question. "She's been awake. This is a normal sleep now. Reports have been coming in from around the area. All the coma victims are waking up except Greg Vincent and Audrey Goins. Both of them died suddenly late yesterday afternoon." Her mouth was a grim line. "What happened, Grant?"

He gazed at Marina's strong-boned face. The shadows beneath her eyes made her look at least a dozen years older than she was. "I found the girl I dreamed about. A human. A waitress named Sherrie Stoltz." The words said so little about who Sherrie actually was. They didn't convey her bright spirit or her powerful inner strength. "Along with a member of the wolf clan, we were able to...create a psychic power strong enough to defeat the man controlling the coma victims," he succinctly explained about Evan Blake.

"You let the wolves have him?" Sonia rose and glared at him, eyes narrowed. "You should've killed him."

"I know," Grant agreed. "But it's not too late. For the sake of peace, let the wolves have their trial and mete out their brand of justice. When they're finished, we'll deliver ours."

Sonia growled and nodded then turned to look at Marina. "She's slept enough over the past weeks. Why don't you wake her up and say hello?"

She put her glasses and book in her huge handbag then approached Grant and touched the gashes on his bare arm. "Looks like the wolf took a chunk out of you."

He didn't bother to explain about the mountain lion. It was too embarrassing to admit he'd nearly been bested by a common animal.

Sonia patted him on the ass before walking from the room. After she was gone, Grant went to Marina's bedside and sat on the mattress. He leaned over her and breathed in her familiar scent—spicy and potent.

“Wake up, Mar,” he ordered, lifting her hand and rubbing his cheek against it. “Come on now. Don't be lazy.”

Ever submissive, except when she wasn't in the mood, Marina obeyed his command and opened her striking iris-blue eyes. “You are here.” Her thick Russian accent made the rolling R's as rich and heavy as beef stroganov.

“Yeah. How are you feeling?”

“Verry bad. Weak. But you are here now. I feel betterrr,” she purred.

“He's gone. He can't hurt you again,” Grant promised and made a silent vow to himself to make certain that was true.

She reached out and stroked his damaged shoulder as Sonia had done. “You are hurt.”

“A little, but mostly I'm damn tired. Too tired to go all the way home. Mind if I sleep here for awhile?”

“You are always welcome in my bed. You know that. Come. Rest.”

He sighed as he crawled beneath the covers and snuggled against her warm body. Marina licked his shoulder then breathed deeply of his skin. “You smell like wolf and human...and sex. What you been up to, Grrrant?”

“It's a long story. I'll tell you later.” His voice was muffled against her warm skin, and already his consciousness was slipping away.

“I will be verry interested to hear such a strange tale.” She stroked him with her soft, wet tongue once more, and that was the last thing Grant remembered.

Lydia Cox held out her hand to Sherrie. “Welcome. I'm so glad you could come. Liberty's been looking forward to meeting you. We should've had you sooner, but we wanted to make sure she was fully recovered.”

“I'm looking forward to meeting her too. Although I feel a little like I already know her. The night I held her hand, I didn't tell you the truth,” Sherrie admitted. “I met her...inside her mind. Saw what she'd seen and got an impression of the man who was holding her hostage. I didn't want to scare you, so I only told John later, after we left.”

Mrs. Cox nodded and gripped her hand tighter. “All that matters is that you saved our little girl.” She nodded toward her husband standing behind her in the entryway of their house. “Brian and I... Our entire family is in your debt. Anything you want or need...”

Sherrie smiled. "To tell the truth, all I really want is a friend or two in this town. People are polite to me. They're all so grateful. But I've been here over a week now and, other than John, I don't really know anyone yet."

Lydia returned her smile, teeth flashing against her brown skin. "You have friends in this house, and I'll introduce you around. Our people can be slow to accept strangers, but once they do, you'll become one of their own."

The Coxes ushered Sherrie and John into the house to the living room where Liberty sat on the couch with her brother R.J. playing a video game. When she glanced up and saw Sherrie, she dropped the controller and jumped off the couch. Her dark eyes shone as she walked quickly across the room. Then she appeared to grow suddenly shy and stopped a few feet in front of Sherrie.

"Hi." She dipped her chin, not quite meeting her eyes.

Sherrie gave a reassuring smile. "Hi. How're you feeling?"

"Okay."

"Good. That was some pretty scary stuff, huh? Freaked me out."

The little girl risked a glance at her. "I know you?" It was half statement, half question.

"Yeah, I think maybe you do. I was poking around inside your head a little, but I didn't look at any secrets, I swear."

Liberty flashed a grin.

"What you playing?" Sherrie asked. "I love Xbox."

The girl shrugged. "One of my brother's dumb sports games. But if you want, we could play DDR. My parents won't buy a Wii. DDR is a really old game, but I still like to play, sometimes, only no one ever wants to do it with me."

"Sure. That's the one where you dance, right? Show me what to do and I'll dance you into the ground, sister."

Liberty giggled. "I don't think so."

As the girl scampered away to pull the plug on her brother's game and set up her own, Sherrie winked at John. It was easy to make friends with a kid. And now that she had the Cox family on her side, maybe she could make some inroads into the community.

In the week she'd lived here, she found the people polite but distant, perhaps concerned about her connection with Evan Blake. She'd seen the house he'd grown up in and had visited the graves of her possible grandparents, Steve and Amanda Blake, but she didn't feel any connection or sudden recognition. Maybe her father being their son was just Evan's fantasy.

John had taken her to see Anna. The wisewoman was a surprise. She didn't give off a New Age mystical vibe or have penetrating, far-seeing eyes. In fact, she reminded Sherrie very much of her eighth-

grade gym teacher, a middle-aged woman with a butch haircut and thick calves. Her manner was abrupt and to the point.

“You want to know about your father? I’ll try, but I don’t know if I can help you with that. My visions are erratic, to say the least,” Anna said. “If I had any control over what I perceive, I’d have been able to identify Evan Blake as the attacker. But I only see what the Spirit chooses to reveal to me, sometimes seemingly random, useless flashes—although they usually make sense later.”

She’d held Sherrie’s hands across the tabletop in her kitchen, such a mundane room for a psychic revelation, what with the lingering smell of coffee and burnt toast in the air. Anna closed her eyes and Sherrie did too. Then she waited. Minutes ticked past. She tried to relax and open her mind so Anna could see whatever she was looking for.

Sherrie started when Anna finally spoke. “Nothing. I’m sorry. I’m just not getting anything.”

Sherrie had opened her eyes, blinking and focusing on the other woman. “That’s all right. I’ve gotten by this long without knowing who my father is. It’s not that big of a deal. Thanks for trying.”

Although she’d been disappointed, Sherrie had meant what she said. It really didn’t matter. She knew who she was, with or without a father. Mostly it was her unsatisfied curiosity about whether or not she had shifter blood that bothered her. Only time would tell about genetics. If she bore a child who howled at the moon, that might be a clue. On the other hand, considering the way her relationship with John was escalating, she might very well have a half-breed child anyway. That opened another whole avenue of things to consider.

Sherrie glanced at John, standing beside her in the Coxes’ living room, and a warm glow spread through her. Just the sight of him could do that. She poked him in the arm. “You going to play DDR? With your reflexes, I bet you’ll be a great dancer.”

“You don’t have to play with Liberty,” Brian said. “Perhaps you’d rather sit and have a drink on the front porch, before dinner.”

“No. It’s cool. I want to play,” Sherrie said. “So does John.”

Soon they were all taking turns at dancing, even stuffy Brian. After John’s turn, he collapsed onto the sofa beside Sherrie and leaned in to whisper in her ear. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

“Why, because I dance so good?” she teased.

“Because you instinctively know what people need and how to bring the best out in them.” He nodded at Cox clumsily trying to match the computerized dance moves on the color-coded mat while his daughter danced as light as a pixie on her own mat.

“I know what *you* need, and I’ll show you later,” she murmured.

Dinner at the Coxes’ table was much more pleasant than last time. Everyone talked and laughed and shared memories. Sherrie learned more about the people of Browning in one hour than she’d learned all week from John.

"What about your family?" Lydia asked. "Were they worried about you when you disappeared?"

"I have a sad answer to that question." She smiled. "No. My mom didn't happen to call those days, so she never knew I was missing. My friends wondered why I wasn't answering my cell, but figured I'd turned it off for some reason. My manager at work was mad when I didn't show up for my next shift, but he wasn't worried. So, no one realized I'd been taken."

By her side, John moved restlessly. She knew he hated the fact he'd kidnapped her.

"I quit my job and called my friends to tell them I'd met someone and was moving. It was amazingly easy to pick up and leave. It only took John and me a couple of hours to clean out my apartment."

"Well, we hope you stay here awhile." Lydia smiled, and her brown eyes crinkled at the corners.

"Yeah, you can spend the night if you want." Liberty took her mother's invitation literally. "You can have my bed. I'll sleep on the floor in my sleeping bag."

"Sorry, Lib, I can't sleep over," Sherrie said. "John would miss me too much. But I'll come back again. I promise."

Later, after their goodbyes, as they climbed into the Blazer to drive home, John turned to her before starting the engine. "I would, you know."

"Would what?"

"Miss you too much if you spent the night with Liberty." He smiled and leaned to kiss her.

She tasted a trace of the strawberry pie that had ended their dinner and, beneath that, the taste of John himself, sweeter to her than the berries.

"I'd miss you too. Even for one night. Your snoring lulls me to sleep."

He nipped her chin before pulling away and revving up the vehicle.

"I've been wondering about something," Sherrie said after they'd turned out of the driveway and headed down the mountain toward town. "You never go out. I mean, as far as I know, you haven't shifted since I've been living with you. Don't you need to go out and hunt some nights? I don't want you to hold back or for you to feel you have to act differently because of me."

She watched his eyes focused intently on the road. He flicked a sideways glance at her. "I didn't want to leave you alone. You haven't been here long, and I didn't want you to feel strange or lonely."

"No. It's cool. You and I are different species. Believe me, I get that. I don't want you to deny your nature because of me." She waved a hand. "Go out. Hunt. Do whatever it is you do. I won't be lonely. Hell, if it's the middle of the night I'll probably be asleep."

"Are you sure?"

God, how she loved the concerned pucker between his brows. He was so sweet, she could eat him up. In fact, she thought she would as soon as they got home.

"I'm sure. But I do have one other question for you."

"Yeah."

“Do you people ever own pets like cats and dogs for companionship?”

He squinted. “They’re not so much companions as they are prey so, no, not really.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “Maybe I’ll get an aquarium.”

Much later, as they pulled apart, sweaty and breathless from having sex, she rolled onto her back and exhaled deeply. “I love making love to you. Wait a minute. Isn’t that a song?”

“I think so. But that’s okay. I love making love to you too.”

“Even more so now that it doesn’t feel like something beyond my control. Know what I mean?” She glanced at him, wondering if he’d felt the change after that last ménage with Grant. The urgency that had driven her toward each of the shifters was gone now. Instead of feeling propelled by an irresistible force, it was normal attraction and affection that propelled her into John’s arms every time.

He nodded. “I want you. But it’s not a compulsion and I don’t feel the same energy building as before.”

“That’s fine with me. I like it this way,” she said. “But I wonder if it would be different if Grant was involved.”

John turned his head on the pillow to gaze at her. “Do you want him to be?”

“Maybe a little. Just for spice. If he came for a visit, I wouldn’t mind inviting him into our bed. What about you?”

She peered into his eyes, trying to read the subtext of what he said. Did he feel threatened by Grant, or secretly aroused by him?

He paused, exhaled, stared at the ceiling. “Well... It wasn’t all bad, I guess, and it would be interesting to see if we build up a charge of energy like before.”

“Or maybe it would just be natural chemistry now.” She rolled to her side to face him and propped her head on her hand. “I have a secret, very hot fantasy about the two of you.”

John cocked an eyebrow. “Really?”

“You know how guys love watching two girls make out?”

He started shaking his head before she’d even finished. “Not gonna happen.”

“Aw, come on, admit it. All that snarling and fighting between the two of you is foreplay. You might like it better than you think.”

“It’s *not* foreplay,” John denied. “But I’ll make you a deal. *If* he drops by some time, we’ll have another threesome as long as you’re the one in the middle.”

“Not going to argue that.” She reached out and brushed the sweaty strands of hair from his forehead.

Just then, from the far side of the house, the doorbell rang. Before they could rise and dress to answer it, a voice floated down the hall. “Hey, anybody home? I’m back.”

“Aw, Jesus.” John flopped onto the bed, arms outstretched.

“Wow. That’s uncanny,” Sherrie said.

“He has sex radar. Heard you from miles away and came running,” he growled.

Grant appeared in the doorway. “Hi. What’s up? Got room for a third?”

Sherrie held out a hand, and he came to join them.

Chapter Thirteen

Two months later...

“There’s no coffee.” Grant wandered into the bedroom and gazed at Sherrie and John lying on the bed, entwined together naked. “No coffee,” he repeated. “In the coffeemaker.”

“Jar’s in the cupboard. Make more,” John snapped.

“Or you could come and join us and make the coffee after,” Sherrie offered.

Grant paused, head cocked as if he was weighing his options—coffee or sex—before giving a feral grin and leaping onto the bed beside them. His purring rumble vibrated against her as he wrapped himself around Sherrie’s backside. One of his hands stole across her hip, and he reached for John’s cock.

Sherrie could almost feel him grinning against the back of her neck. He knew it irked John to admit to their attraction. The two shifters were mostly all about pleasuring her, but there was an undeniable element of attraction between them too. Grant chose to play with it, while John tried to ignore it. Sherrie simply enjoyed it. The sight of one of her handsome lovers caressing the other was extremely erotic. And on the rare occasions they kissed, her heart melted at the beautiful sight.

She watched now as Grant stroked John’s thick cock, eliciting a grunt from him. The panther wrapped his long-fingered hand around the other man’s shaft, pulling slowly upward from base to tip. He drew back John’s foreskin and caressed a thumb over the weeping slit in the rounded head. Meanwhile, he rubbed his own erection between Sherrie’s buttocks. The glide of his cock over her anus set the opening twitching. She wanted him inside, filling her tight channel while John fucked her pussy. The pair of them doing her at the same time was a rare experience to be savored. She craved it now with the raging thirst of one who’d been wandering in a desert.

John’s eyes closed and his lips parted as he surrendered to the pleasure of Grant’s massaging hand. He submitted for several moments before opening his eyes and focusing on Sherrie. Lowering his head to her breast, he worried her nipple with his teeth, nipping it in his wolfish way. John’s mauling was just right, neither too rough nor too gentle. He knew how to make her gasp and yelp then sigh in exquisite pleasure.

Sherrie arched her chest toward his mouth, pushed her bottom against Grant’s cock and felt every inch of the hot walls of flesh surrounding her. The hard muscle and smooth skin of John’s back rippled beneath her hands. She grasped his taut buttocks and pulled him toward her, silently asking him for what she craved.

Grant's warmth disappeared from her back as he rolled toward the nightstand to get the lube. A moment later, she felt his heat again then his fingers, cool and gelled, slipping between her ass cheeks and tickling the rim of her hole.

Sheltered between the men's big bodies, Sherrie's desire mounted. She felt their combined heat would melt her until she was no more than a drizzle of sticky honey gluing them together. The crackling supernatural power that had once fused them may have burned out, but every time they had a threesome, it was still a thrilling ride.

John guided his cock to Sherrie's entrance, impaling her in one strong thrust. He glided easily on a slick of her juices to fill her deeply. She groaned and tilted her face to receive his kiss. His tongue swept around hers, possessing her mouth as his cock did her pussy.

Behind her, Grant slipped one long finger into her hole, stretching the opening with gentle but insistent invasion. He added a second finger, and a ripple of excitement went through her as her muscles clenched around him. So tight, so intense, as he slowly pumped his fingers in and out, going deeper each time.

Now. Now. Both of you now. Her mindless, frenzied plea for more may have reached Grant. They still had an unspoken mental communication that seemed to bring him down from the mountain for a visit whenever she desired him. As if he heard her now, he replaced his probing fingers with the head of his cock.

While John thrust slowly into her pussy, Grant eased his length into her backside in careful increments. Her sphincter widened to accommodate his girth, burning a little at the extreme stretch. Sherrie moaned quietly then held her breath as he filled her deeper.

John paused in his thrusting, his jaw clenched with the effort of holding back. A sheen of sweat glistened on his face, and his eyes were dark slits focused on her and on Grant behind her. She guessed he could feel the other man's cock inside her through the thin wall of flesh that separated them.

John both disliked and was extremely aroused by sharing her with the panther, who still made his hackles rise. He'd explained that wolves were territorial creatures who tended to be monogamous in their mating. And although he was willing to allow Grant into their bed on occasion, it went against his natural inclination, even while it excited him. Sherrie believed the push-pull of his emotions only enhanced the thrill for John.

Right now he certainly looked excited as he watched Grant's face and waited for the other man to reach his full depth inside her. Sherrie exhaled, relaxing her muscles to accept Grant's thickness all the way up her narrow channel. When it seemed he could go no farther, he pushed a little deeper yet, and she cried out. The panther pressed his lips to the side of her neck and murmured something, a wordless, soothing purr of a sound.

For several moments, suspended like a fat water droplet waiting to fall from a faucet, all three of them held utterly still. Sherrie closed her eyes again, reaching out with her other senses to examine every aspect of this union: the incredible heat of the flesh surrounding her, damp skin pressed to hers, hands touching her, cocks filling her completely. Her own body was like the throbbing heartbeat in the center and the three of them were one being.

Then Grant pulled his length from inside her. Sherrie's body let go reluctantly and he groaned at the friction as he pulled out. When he pushed back in, it was John's turn to recede, relinquishing territory slowly. The sea-saw motion continued with one man then the other filling her. There was no need for Sherrie to move at all, not to thrust or reach for either of them. They passed her pliant body back and forth between them in a gentle rhythm at first which gradually grew faster.

A low, rumbling growl sounded from deep in John's chest. His brown eyes gleamed golden, and the hair on Sherrie's nape rose at the wolfish display. He gritted his teeth and they seemed sharper and longer than normal. He pumped into her harder now and more erratically, not timing his thrusts with Grant's. When they both filled her at once, Sherrie cried out at the intense sensation.

Grant hissed near her ear, either a warning to John or from sheer pleasure, and his teeth scored the juncture of her neck and shoulder. She gasped and jerked more from surprise than from pain. Her senses were already overloaded, her body teetering on the brink of orgasm, and Grant's bite was enough to put her over the edge.

She yelled as her body contracted and stars and fireworks burst in her head. Her climax was so profound, tears stung her eyes.

A yowl of pleasure came from Grant, and he bucked against her once more before holding still and pulsing inside her. John groaned quietly and pumped fast several times before he came too. He held her tight, fingers digging into her hip and his narrowed eyes focused on hers. That was John. He always made that connection with her unless he was fucking her from behind.

Gasping through the tail end of her climax, Sherrie blinked and looked back at him, treasuring their bond which had grown to be much more than a sexual one. She enjoyed playing with Grant, but she was falling in love with John.

They remained frozen in their multiple clench for another moment before Grant disengaged and rolled away from Sherrie, heaving a long breath. "Good," he groaned.

Sherrie heartily agreed. She remained in John's embrace with his softening cock inside her for a little longer. Burying her face into the crook of his shoulder, she licked salt from his skin. "Okay?" she whispered, knowing his ambivalent feelings about sharing her with Grant.

He nodded and nuzzled the side of her head. "It's fine. I know you're mine," he murmured back.

She knew it too. Raising her face from his shoulder, she looked into his eyes and saw the unabashed devotion in them. The strength of his commitment rocked her. All the aborted relationships in her life

seemed paltry now, and she wondered why she'd wasted tears on any of those men. John was the real deal, a faithful, dedicated man—all right, were-creature—who would stand by her forever.

The longer she knew him, the more she found they had in common. They both liked outdoor activities like hiking, biking and climbing, although John wasn't overly fond of swimming or boating. "Wolves and water don't mix," he'd once told her. He wasn't a huge fan of the arts, but was happy to go to movies, concerts or plays with her, even though it entailed driving miles to the nearest large city.

Sherrie had found him to be even-tempered and calm, a good balance to her more volatile nature. But most of all she loved the way he simply loved her—unreasoning, elemental emotion without strings attached. She thought this might be their last time with Grant. It was no sacrifice for her to give up their occasional threesomes if that made John more confident of her feelings for him. Grant was sexy as hell, but he wasn't indispensable to her like John was.

"How about that coffee now?"

Sherrie pulled away from John and glanced over her shoulder. Grant's amber eyes blinked, and his brows rose.

"You were going to make it, remember?" she said.

"Was I?" He feigned ignorance.

"I'll do it." John rose from the bed and padded across the room. Sherrie watched the graceful swagger of his naked backside with interest.

When he was out of the room, she turned to Grant. "Tell me the truth now. Did you go after Evan? Is he dead?"

He widened his eyes, looking so exactly like a cat pretending he hadn't just eaten the goldfish that she nearly laughed. But this was no goldfish. They were talking about a man's life, albeit a dangerous man who'd killed a few people and threatened many more. They were talking about a man who might be her half-brother, a man who might share her blood.

"Did you?" she demanded.

Grant shrugged. "Wolf law isn't our law. We do things our own way."

It wasn't an answer. Sherrie continued to stare at him, waiting.

"He's been taken care of," Grant said, and the finality in his tone left her with no doubt that the man who'd claimed he was her brother was dead. She'd never know the truth about Evan Blake. She was left with a possibility which would always haunt her.

Grant studied her face. "That upsets you. Why?"

"If he really was my brother, I would've liked to know and to find out more about him, what made him the way he was."

“He was a crazy fucker. Let it go,” he advised then changed the subject with his usual abruptness. “How are things with you and the wolf?” He nodded toward the doorway through which John had disappeared. “You planning to keep living with the wolves?”

She nodded. “I like this town, even if some of the people don’t like having me here. Most are okay, and I can win over the others in time. My mom and I always moved around a lot, so I got pretty good at adapting to new situations.”

Grant smiled. “You’re more like us. Panthers don’t need a pack. We travel alone and always land on our feet. You should come up the mountain and meet some of my people sometime. I think you’d like my friend Marina, who told me to tell you thanks for saving her life. We could have some fun together.”

“Maybe I will. I’ll think about it.” But she doubted she would.

The smell of brewing coffee wafted from the other room along with the aroma and sound of sizzling bacon.

Grant rolled off the bed. “Guess we should go help so he doesn’t complain.”

“He never complains. You just enjoy goading him.” Sherrie slipped into John’s Colorado U T-shirt and followed Grant to the kitchen where John was preparing a late evening breakfast.

“Won’t you be going out hunting soon?” she asked.

“Not tonight. Not me, anyway, I can’t speak for Grant. I smell rain coming and it’s pretty cozy indoors.”

“She’s domesticated you, Balto,” Grant teased. “Next time I come around, you’ll be wearing a collar and leash.”

Sherrie grinned and waggled her eyebrows at John when he looked at her. “A leash and collar sounds kinda sexy to me. What do you think? Are metal spikes too much?”

John smiled back at her and mouthed silently, “We’ll talk.” Grant seemed to think John lacked a sense of a humor, but he had no idea.

Sherrie watched the two men chopping onions and frying potatoes and thought this was exactly what people meant by domestic tranquility. She’d never been happier. Part animal though they might be, John and Grant were more human than some of the guys she’d dated in L.A.

She thought back to the night John had snatched her off the street as she trudged home from work. She’d never have imagined her kidnapper would turn out to be her lover and one of the best men she’d ever met. And Grant? Well, she still wasn’t quite sure where he and his polyamorous nature fit into the equation, but he certainly kept things spicy for them.

She loved her new life, but maybe it was time to go see her mother and ask a few questions about her memories of Sherrie’s dad. Surely someone in Browning would have at least one picture of the man, and maybe her mom would recognize his face. But Sherrie knew she’d return to Browning where at long last she’d found a home.

At that moment, both shifters happened to look at her, brown eyes and golden both glowing with affection. Sherrie smiled at them and mentally repeated that last comforting thought. *I'm home.*

About the Author

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To save the one they love, they're going in with spells blazing...

Lions' Pride

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Duals and Donovans: The Different, Book 1

Elissa Donovan is a real green witch—when she and her lion-shapeshifter husband have sex, the blazing heat is recycled to warm their house. Now her beloved Jude has been kidnapped by a shadowy government agency, and the last place she can turn for help is her high-powered family, who considers her magical mediocrity.

When Rafe Benedict gets Elissa's call for muscle to back up her magic, he risks his law enforcement career to answer. He's spent a lifetime hiding his Dual ability, but something about Elissa and Jude's magic awakens the cougar within him.

Tempting, bronzed Rafe is the perfect fuse for Elissa's sex-fueled magic. Danger lies in breaking her vows; joining with anyone other than her true mate could not only send her marriage up in flames, it could burn out her powers in a last, all-or-nothing explosion. But Jude is worth the risk. And for Rafe, potential heartbreak is nothing next to the chance to help the two people he's coming to love.

First, though, Rafe needs a crash course in Cougar...

Enjoy the following excerpt from Lions' Pride:

The two men watched out the window as Elissa drove away. Then Rafe went back to alternately fiddling with his gun and pacing. Jude picked a magazine at random from a rack by one of the chairs. It turned out to be a year-old copy of Good Housekeeping, but he forced himself to read recipes and parenting advice and articles about people dealing with ordinary problems like bankruptcy and cancer.

The distraction only worked so long.

"How much longer do you think she'll be?" Jude tossed the magazine aside and focused his energy on not wringing his hands or biting his nails or some other unmanly show of the jitters.

And not staring too hard at Rafe.

He did better with the not-wringing-his-hands part than with not staring.

Rafe was pacing, too, and watching him in motion was anything but calming. Too damn easy to imagine the muscles moving under his clothes, too easy to see the cat inside the human-seeming form. Too damn easy to remember pumping into his gorgeous ass.

Or to wonder, as a way of not obsessing about Elissa's absence, how weird and yet hot it would be to let Rafe fuck him.

That was almost as scary in its way as everything else going on, even if it was more the fun, roller-coaster flavor of scary.

Jude repeated the question, phrasing it a little differently. “When do you think she’ll be back?” Maybe he’d stop pacing while he talked, and Jude could stop imagining Rafe’s body over his.

No such luck. Now he was running his fingers through his hair as he paced, calling attention to its black silk texture. Cop-short though it was, it still managed to look sexily out of control. Just what Jude didn’t need.

“She hasn’t been gone all that long. She’s fine. Relax.”

Easy for Rafe to say.

“I know. I’d know if something happened to her, like she does with me.” *Like either of us would with you now, like it or not.* “It’s just... Dammit, she keeps putting herself on the line for me. For us.”

“This time she’s just buying food—unless you want to eat worn-out furniture? I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to risk hunting unless we’re really in the boonies.” Rafe raised an eyebrow. “I guess we are in the boonies, but I mean farther in the boonies. Or in Canada.”

“But it’s just that...” He couldn’t speak the words. Out loud, they’d sound too corny, too sentimental. *“I hate having her out of our sight.”*

It came off better in silentspeech, with all the right overtones of “a pride divided is a pride endangered”. And none of what he was afraid might come out if he spoke English, that now their world had shrunk to the three of them versus, basically, everyone. He needed Elissa in ways he’d never imagined. He needed Rafe, too, and when Elissa wasn’t around, he needed Rafe too much, wanted to cling and act in ways he dared to do with Elissa, but not with another man.

Silentspeech was safer.

Rafe nodded. “I hear you.” He could pick up Jude’s silentspeech while in human form, but hadn’t yet perfected the knack of answering that way. “I’d rather stay together, even though what she said made sense.”

“Maybe she’ll get steak,” Jude said, trying to distract himself. “I could use some raw meat. Bet you could, too.”

Rafe flashed a lecherous grin. “I’ve got your raw meat right here.” Jude couldn’t help chuckling, and Rafe said, “Got you to laugh. See, everything will be fine.”

Rafe didn’t stop pacing, though.

“Then why are you wearing a trail in the floor and twitching like Trickster dropped ants down your pants?”

“Hey, just because I understand doesn’t mean I have to like it. She’ll be back soon. Hour or less. With that steak you’re talking about and, if we’re lucky, hot coffee all around. Then we can hit the road.”

“Coffee.” Jude sighed, but though coffee sounded wonderful, it wasn’t really coffee that was making him sigh.

“Soon” couldn’t be too soon for Jude.

Every minute apart from Elissa was torture at this point.

And every minute alone with Rafe was torture of a different kind.

As long as Elissa was with them, he could accept the attraction to Rafe. As long as Elissa was in the bed, too, he could touch Rafe and still feel like himself. It wasn't even a question of feeling straight. Dual culture didn't care much about that shit, thinking of it as human silliness that came from not understanding the Powers didn't give a hairball what you did as long as everyone involved had fun. If anything, he felt dumb for not at least giving it a try when he was single and occasionally got hit on by guys.

The sinking realization that it was becoming more than sex, on the other hand, terrified him almost as much as Shaw did.

Tackling the guy and fucking him into next week? That was just good clean dirty fun, with a bonus of turning Elissa on and helping rebuild her magical reserves. Daydreaming about Rafe staying with them, building a new life with them after they got to Canada? Now that was scary shit. He'd never known a lion family with more than one adult male in it, except for the ones that were all guys and that was another ball of wax. Or bottle of lube.

On the other hand, foxes pulled it off all the time. Fox dual women were collectors of fine men and fox guys liked it that way, especially since most of them weren't averse to another fine man, either.

Hells, if it worked for foxes...

Jude hadn't realized how hard and how viscerally he was thinking until Rafe stopped pacing and said, "Does Elissa know you have a thing for fox women?"

Bluff! "I don't, really, but did you know fox girls can keep their ears and tails when they shift to wordside? It's cute as hell."

Rafe grinned. "Sounds sexy to me, like one of those Japanese cartoons. If I'm reborn as a dual, I want to be a Japanese woman. I'm sure it helps you get laid over there, considering the thing they seem to have for chicks with tails."

"You are a bad, bad man."

Rafe stopped pacing, shook his head, ran his fingers through his hair again, but slowly and deliberately, obviously aware he had an audience. "You don't know the half of it yet." He licked his lips.

The world narrowed to Jude and Rafe. Doomed. Jude leaned forward, hoping Rafe would pick up the way his muscles twitched with excitement like a cat getting ready to pounce, and at the same time hoping he wouldn't.

Despite the chill in the house, Rafe refused to wear a coat, just a cream long-sleeved T-shirt that, being Jude's, was too big, but still set off his dark complexion, and black jeans, also a bit too big. Jude had been trying not to remember how the muscles barely concealed by the soft shirt felt under his hands, how the bulge tucked inside those worn jeans felt in his mouth, how it felt to explode inside Rafe's ass. To

wonder if he dared let Rafe try fucking him, even though that might cross a line into unknown territory that looked tempting and treacherous in equal measure.

He'd tried not to think about all that. Now he admitted to himself he was failing.

He bit back the words that wanted to come out. It would be rude, if nothing else, to get something going on while Elissa wasn't there.

"Elissa won't be back for an hour," Rafe said. "You deserve longer than that—but it'll do for a start."

Trickster's furry ass, Rafe was getting as hard to shut out of his head as Elissa was, or he read body language way too well.

"I can't lie to her," he said, knowing Rafe would fill in any degree of non-sequitur.

"No lies." Rafe drew closer, close enough that the heat of his body radiated to Jude's. "Just getting started without her. She'll catch up. Who knows when we'll have a safe place to play again?"

He lifted Jude's shirt, put surprisingly hot hands against his bare skin. Touching, his silent speech became strong enough Jude could see what he had in mind, what he was craving. It went straight to his cock at the same time it made his stomach flip with anxiety.

Rafe wanted to fuck him. Wanted it badly.

Wanted it enough that the want seeped into Jude, bridging the gap between his curiosity and lust and his fears.

He took a deep breath.

It was just another kind of sex. Edgy, but hot in the way edgy things sometimes were. Either he'd love it or he wouldn't, but didn't he want to get past the fear and find out? He'd known too much real fear lately to let nerves about the unknown get to him.

He trusted Rafe with his life and his wife. Why not his ass?

He'd do it, damn it.

Three balls. Three sexual adventures. One true love.

Cinderella Unmasked

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In the years since her husband King Charming boarded a pirate ship to “find himself”, Queen Ella has ruled alone. Romantic love? It’s a girlish emotion. These days, her only confidant is her steward, Sebastian.

Five years is a long time to forego sexual pleasures. She’s the queen, after all..shouldn’t she be allowed a few indulgences? A masquerade is just the ticket to find fulfillment Charming never gave her. With Sebastian’s encouragement—and a little help from a fairy godmother—Ella prepares to make some magic.

The first masked stranger she dallies with gives her a taste of what she’s been craving. And it’s just not enough. A second ball follows. A third. Each one—and each anonymous man—sends her to new heights of sexual pleasure. And reawakens the notion that maybe, just maybe, love does not always lead to pain.

Her indiscretions have not gone unnoticed. As her stepfamily makes a move to take over the throne, Ella has nowhere to turn, no one to trust...except the men behind the masks...

Enjoy the following excerpt for Cinderella Unmasked:

Alone at last in the darkness of the night, Ella let out a long breath and stretched luxuriously in her large, lonely bed. Finally, she could let go of all the vital strands of rule and concentrate on the event looming larger and larger in her mind: the ball.

Surely there would be many attractive men to choose from, many who wouldn’t be able to believe their luck if she invited them to a quiet corner for a kiss. Or a grope. A gloved, masculine hand on her naked breast, a mask surrounding eyes that glittered with lust as she let him press his bone-hard erection against her...

Ella let out a moan of frustration, sweeping her hand down the length of her nightgown-clad body from breast to thigh. Involuntarily, her hips pushed upward, thrusting her aching pussy into her own hand.

Could she do that? A secluded tree beside the terrace, her arms wrapped around it while a large, worshipping builder pounded into her body...

Ella thrust her hand under the inconvenient nightgown and pushed her fingers between her pussy’s hot, damp folds, beginning to gyrate her hips with the delicious vision of herself and the imaginary builder. When she lifted her skirts for him, he would be unable to believe his luck. He would be strong and rough, his big, calloused hands covering her breasts, kneading them, squeezing her hard, elongated nipples between his fingers...

Oh yes. Ella grasped her own breast with her free hand, pinching her nipple. With her other hand she rubbed her clitoris harder. Her builder's cock would be huge and blunt, and he'd be afraid to hurt her until she pushed back onto him. Then he'd power into her, slamming her against the tree, the rough bark scraping her flesh...

Ella arched upward with a gasp, thrusting two fingers inside herself. The builder would hammer her mercilessly until he gave her the release she craved. And then...

Well, she couldn't really imagine what then. Massive orgasm there would certainly be on both sides. And no risk of pregnancy or disease since she would have taken the magic potion her godmother Lucinda provided her. Besides, she was probably barren—she'd certainly never conceived with Charming

But enough of such mood-dampening thoughts! Perhaps a tree in the open with a builder would not be best. Perhaps a lover with more finesse...a man she'd take to this very bed, who'd undress her slowly, kissing her breasts for a delightfully long time, teasing her and pleasuring her at once. He'd lick his way down her naked body, his own lean and hard and ready. But he wouldn't just take her. He'd kiss all of her first, latching his clever mouth to her pussy, sucking and licking at her clitoris.

Ella's fingers moved frantically. She'd be on the verge of orgasm when—hell, bring the builder back. She'd have *his* cock in her mouth and he'd be groaning with ecstasy while she writhed with joy under the more skilled lover's mouth. Then, as she began to come, the refined one would plunge his cock inside her pussy and she'd be pleasuring them both at once. They'd tie her to the bed, take turns fucking her all night, take her both at once, in her mouth, her pussy, her...

"Oh God," Ella whispered, and fell into ecstasy at last. Her imaginary lovers vanished, leaving nothing but the joy tearing her apart.

The usual coldness crept through her as soon as the pleasure began to fade. But the excitement remained. She had no idea how it would turn out; she ached simply for a man, a lover, and right now she didn't care who or what he was, or in what circumstances she took him. She wanted sex, dirty, fun, amazing sex. She wanted *everything*.

And for the first time in years she had a reasonable hope of getting it.

Sebastian's quill broke, snapping him out of his reverie and alerting him to the unnecessary force with which he'd been pressing pen to paper. Completely unnecessary since he hadn't actually written anything for ten minutes.

Throwing down the broken quill, he swept his fingers through his hair till it came loose from its black, confining ribbon. He pushed back his chair.

He'd done everything he needed to for this damned ball, anyhow. Decoration was almost complete, food and wine was ordered, guest list vetted, approved and invitations delivered. He'd sent dressmakers to

the queen to prepare her costume, and chosen his own simple mask in case he troubled to wear it. By tomorrow night everything would be ready. And by the following morning...

Sebastian stood abruptly. He didn't want to think about that. He wasn't stupid. He understood what this ball was really about. He couldn't blame her. The poor woman hadn't been laid in years—and if rumor was true, she hadn't been laid much before that, either. Given Charming's recently revealed preferences, that was hardly surprising, but a woman as passionate as Ella needed far more than pretty words and flowers. She needed a man.

He didn't begrudge her a little snatched happiness, but everything in him revolted against helping her find it like this. Apart from anything else, he wasn't convinced it wouldn't be aiding her political suicide. The people accepted her because they'd put her on a pedestal, which she seemed determined to dive off head first and legs akimbo.

Without their acclaim, her position was untenable. And his. What price then the ambition that had driven him from poverty to the second highest power in the land? If she fell, so did he.

Intriguing idea. At least then he might get some sleep.

Finding himself at the window, he threw the casement fully up and stuck his head out into the fresh, cooling air. His "apartment"—a tiny room that served as both bed chamber and private office—was on the ground floor, and looked out onto one of the kitchen courtyards. As if he needed anything to remind him about his true position in the queen's life. Useful, as a pen or a piece of furniture was useful, and taken for granted to the same degree. Did she even see him when she turned those huge, blue eyes up to his in yet another request or demand? She'd look right through him tomorrow night to get at some handsome, unscrupulous rogue who could cause the kingdom untold damage, even let Malevolin in...

A loud crash interrupted his bleak speculation. Blinking, Sebastian saw a figure fighting its way out of the dustbins in the corner of the courtyard.

"Goodness me!" it whispered as more bins fell. "Oh goodness me, what a... Oh, dear." Stumbling clear at last, the figure shook itself out and by the light of the moon and his own lamp, Sebastian saw that it was a woman. A very small and very old woman in a black, hooded cloak from which strands of white hair straggled free.

"What in the world are you doing?" he asked, amused.

The old woman jumped. "Oh, goodness! Oh, dear!" she said again. "I think I arrived in just the wrong..." As she spoke, she drew closer to him, peering hard into his face. "But then again... What's your name, young man?"

"Sebastian," he said dryly. "What's yours?"

"Oh, that's not important."

"It might be to the guards when they arrest you for trespassing."

“Arrest me?” The old woman looked stunned. “They can’t arrest me! Cinderella would never allow it!”

Sebastian frowned at her. He was sure he’d never seen her before. “Why? Who the devil are you?”

The old lady smiled—a singularly sweet if vague smile. “I’m your fairy godmother, of course.”

“Of course,” Sebastian sighed. He’d have one of the guards take the poor old thing home.

“Well, strictly speaking, not *your* fairy godmother, but I do like to help the unhappy—and you are unhappy, aren’t you, dear?”

“Not in the slightest,” said Sebastian, giving her the look that withered haughty noblemen.

“Nonsense, you drew me here like a bullet. No wonder I landed so abruptly. Dustbins indeed! Anyhow, now that I *am* here, what’s your problem?”

“I do not have a problem.” *Apart from you.*

He was already drawing his head back in, preparatory to summoning the guard, when she enquired, “Going to the ball?”

In spite of himself, Sebastian smiled sourly over his shoulder. “Organizing the damned ball.”

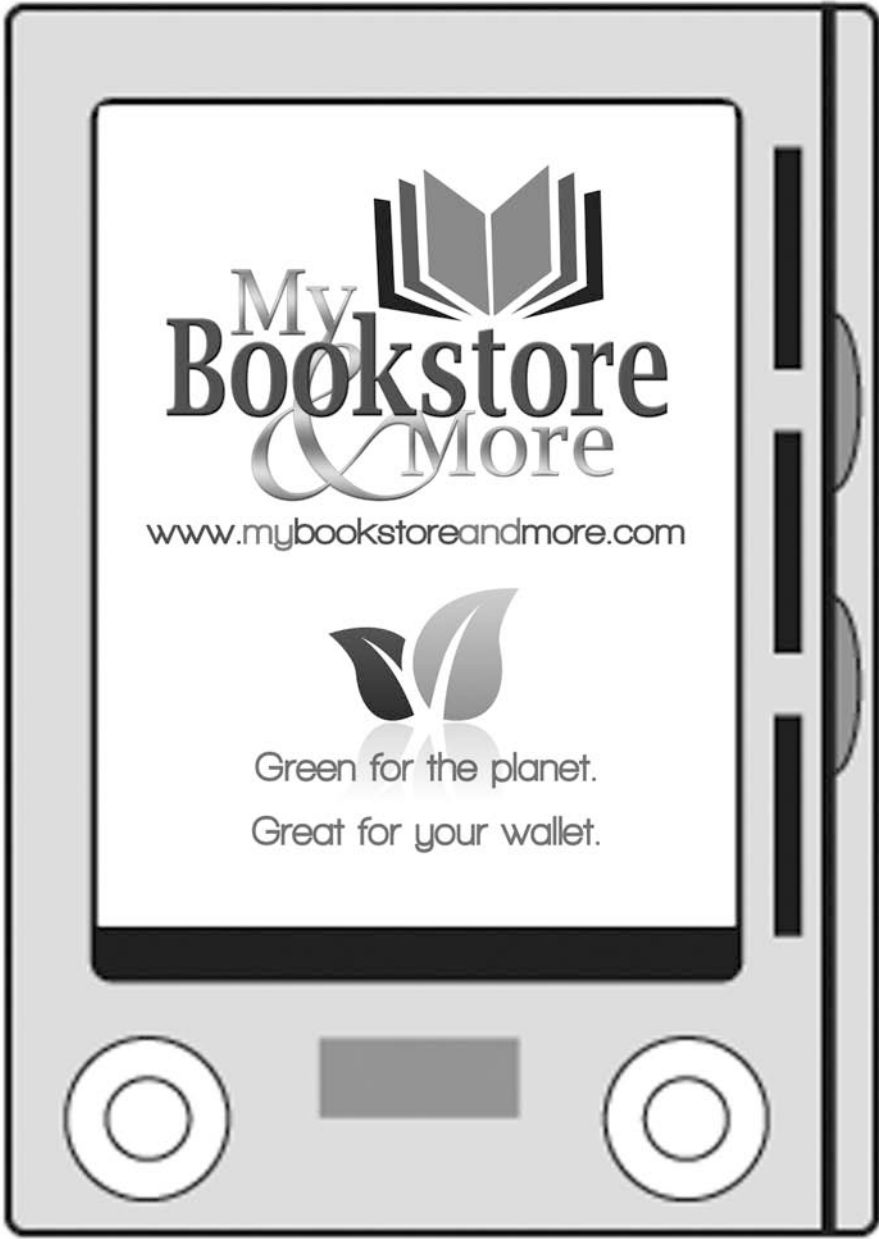
“So you’ll be there? Then perhaps I can grant you a wish.”

I wish you could.

“I did for Cinderella once, you know. At another ball. She met the prince, as he was then…” Her voice trailed off, unhappily. But Sebastian, against his better judgment, had turned to stare at her. The mad old trout actually brightened under his disbelief.

“Come on then,” she encouraged. “What would you like?”

Sebastian laughed. *What I wish for, nobody can grant.*



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