



MOIRA ROGERS

CRUX

SOUTHERN ARCANA • BOOK 1

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Moira Rogers

Dedication

Dedicated to Matt & Mike, the mysterious men who keep both halves of Moira Rogers well supplied with both chocolate and unwavering (if occasionally exasperated) support as we chase our dreams.

Special thanks also go to the following people for invaluable support: to Erin, for being our number one fan and our BFF at the same time. To Yvonne for coming up with a title when we thought the right one would never be found. To Theresa, who is a fabulous beta reader and an even more entertaining friend.

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Prologue

She ran.

The earth flew under her feet, moving so fast it was nothing but a blur of greens and browns. Her ground-devouring lope felt effortless and, though the sun had long since set, she had no problem making out the landscape around her. Gentle rolling hills gave way to a flat, grassy plain on the left and a steep hill climbing into a dense forest on the right.

She altered her path, heading toward the hill and the safety of the woods. The woods offered protection from predators. The woods offered comfortable places to bed down, safe places to make a den. The woods offered prey.

She ran, but not because she had to. She ran because she loved to, loved feeling the wind rush past, the ground beneath her feet, the freedom of movement and speed.

She loved being *free*.

The loud report of a gun startled her, interrupting her long, smooth stride. Her ears twitched as the shots sounded

again, coming from the direction of the flatlands behind her. She took off again, climbing the hill with ease.

The first strong tree she came to was her refuge, and she ascended into its lower branches with no difficulty. The leaves, aided by the darkness of night, would shield her from the interlopers and their weapons.

She flinched anyway when the gunshots rang out a third time, closer than ever before.

Closer. Always closer...

The shots faded, replaced by the sound of a wailing siren drifting through the thin walls, and Mackenzie Brooks shivered as she bolted upright in the bed, torn from her fitful dreams by the raucous noises outside. The air conditioning didn't work in the aging motel room, and it must have been eighty degrees outside, even though the sun had gone down hours ago. Still, goose bumps dotted her arms as she forced herself off the hard mattress and over to the window.

There wasn't much to see, just the cracked pavement of the parking lot and the garish neon sign belonging to the liquor store across the street. So far, Memphis had been ugly and depressing. The only thing the city had going for it was that no one had tried to kidnap her since she'd arrived.

She let the curtain fall and moved back to the bed, rubbing her arms as she considered turning on the television.

A brief attempt to find something to watch the night before had revealed only two working channels, but anything had to be better than pacing anxiously from the bed to the window and back for the rest of the night.

A nearby door slammed, the sudden crash enough to make her jump, and she stifled an embarrassing shriek. She sat frozen on the bed, her heart pounding in her chest until she heard the slurred, amused voices of people too far gone on drugs and alcohol to care if everyone else could hear them. It was a common occurrence in the dingy motel, as were the gunshots and the sirens. For someone who had grown up in midwestern suburbia, the motel was a place out of a nightmare.

Mackenzie took deep breaths as she rose and crossed the room, this time retrieving her large duffle bag from the floor and bringing it back to the bed. Inside an inner pocket she found the envelope containing her remaining cash. Her fingers trembled as she sorted through the bills, and she struggled to fight back tears when she realized how little was left. Not enough for a better motel, not even enough for more than another day or two in this one. Tomorrow she'd have to go out and find work, or find a way to leave town.

And she had to do it without running into Marcus or his thugs, all of whom seemed able to find her wherever she ran, no matter how carefully she hid. Everything bad that had

happened to her in the past month could be traced back to the day Marcus had shown up on her doorstep with his killer good looks and his Hollywood smile, and proceeded to tear her life apart.

The sound of another door slamming shook Mackenzie out of her reverie. She shivered again and gritted her teeth to keep them from chattering as panic rose from nowhere. With it came the sudden certainty that she needed to get out of town. *Now.*

Mackenzie caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror, saw her own face staring back at her wide-eyed and panicked. Somehow she knew she couldn't wait until the next day, couldn't waste time looking for a job. She couldn't stay a minute longer.

Listening to that inner prompting had kept her alive and ahead of Marcus. She rose from the bed and reached for her keys, then froze. They had to be tracking her somehow, and her car was the only thing she hadn't abandoned yet.

Leave it. Her motel wasn't far from the interstate, and there was a truck stop right down the road. Maybe, if she was lucky, one of the truckers would be willing to give her a ride, and she could lose Marcus and his goons for good. Wherever she ended up, it had to be better than the last three cities.

It *had* to be.

Chapter One

“Nicole Peyton, as I live and breathe.” Jackson Holt grabbed a stool and flashed the woman behind the bar a grin he knew matched his smooth drawl. “You get prettier every day.”

“Can it, Holt,” Nick shot back good-naturedly. “Save the flirtatious Georgia-boy act for someone who isn’t immune to your dubious charms.”

“Hey, there happen to be many, *many* women who find my charms enticing.”

“Mmm, yes.” She wiped a glass with a clean white towel and placed it in the plastic rack beside her. “But are they of sound mind, or just body?”

“Don’t much check their minds, usually,” he admitted with another grin.

“*Non compos mentis*, I tell you.” Nick fixed him with an admonishing glare. “And there you go again with the flirting. I asked you down so we could talk business.”

Jackson frowned. Nicole Peyton never wanted to talk business. Despite her family’s connections, she kept her nose

clean and stayed out of trouble, choosing instead to focus her energies on running her small but popular bar. “You’re not in some kind of difficulty, are you, Nicky?”

The petite brunette waved a hand and crinkled her nose. “If that were the case, I wouldn’t waste time joking about your endless stream of hot, vapid blondes.” She held up a glass. “You working?”

“Yeah. Alec and I are on a case.”

She poured him a soda. “I need a favor.”

Jackson frowned again. Coming from anyone else, the words might be innocuous. But coming from Nick... “This isn’t going to be like the time during Mardi Gras when I had to explain to that cop why I was carrying a half-naked woman on my back, is it?”

She laughed and shook her head, sending her ponytail swaying. “No. Less nakedness, and hopefully no police involvement.”

“*Hopefully?* Now, that doesn’t sound too promising.”

Nick leaned forward, her brown eyes and expression serious. “I just hired a new girl, Mackenzie.”

“Did someone quit?” Curiosity quirked his brow. “It’s off-season.”

“No,” she admitted, shaking her head again. “Tourism is picking back up this year, but not that much yet. She seemed

desperate, though, so I took pity on her. Then she asked me to pay her in cash. Daily.”

You didn’t have to be in his line of work for *that* to set off a cascade of warning bells. “You think she’s on the run?”

“Maybe, but I don’t really get a criminal vibe from her. It’s more like...” She trailed off and seemed to be searching for words. “Every time the door opens, she nearly jumps out of her skin. She’s skittish as hell.”

Jackson pondered her words. “As if she keeps expecting someone to walk through it.”

“Right.”

“Someone she doesn’t want to see.”

Nick nodded. “Exactly.”

He tapped a beer mat on the dark, polished wood of the bar. “Has she mentioned a boyfriend or husband? Any other kind of bad situation?”

Nick blew her bangs up and gave him an exasperated look. “Would I be offering to slash yours and Alec’s bar tab in half if she seemed willing to regale me with her life story?”

Now she had his full attention. “In half, you say?”

“Uh-huh. All you have to do is follow her home.” Nick bit her lip. “She told me she had a decent place to stay, but I don’t think I believe her. I just want to make sure.”

It seemed easy enough. *Too* easy, in fact. “What are you not telling me, Nicky?”

The pretty brunette pursed her lips and flashed him a sheepish look. “I think she might be a shapeshifter.”

Mackenzie had an excellent memory for faces and had developed an equally good memory for drinks. By the time the tall, well-tanned man slid onto a bar stool in front of her she’d already poured him a pint of the same beer he’d ordered the last two times. She tossed a coaster on the bar, set the beer in front of him and offered him an open, vaguely flirtatious smile. “I’d never forget a man who likes fine imported drafts, but I’ve forgotten your name again.”

“I’m Derek. Derek Gabriel.” The man grinned at her, the gesture transforming his face from rugged to handsome. It was nothing unusual for the bar; Mahalia’s always seemed to be full of attractive men. Even better, they tipped well, a fact that was refilling that envelope in her duffel bag more quickly than she’d dared to hope.

Mr. Imported Draft Beer—*Derek Gabriel*, she reminded herself—was no different. He seemed to enjoy flirting with her, though Mackenzie had already discerned he wasn’t serious. It didn’t take a genius to notice the way his eyes followed Nick whenever she was around.

Mackenzie shifted her gaze to her boss. Nick stood at the other end of the bar, holding a low conversation with a man Mackenzie hadn’t seen before. Even if she hadn’t had a good

memory, his was a face she would've remembered, with a strong jaw, a tiny cleft in his chin and a mouth made to smile. He was laughing when she glanced at them, and she was struck by the bright blue of his eyes as they glinted with amusement. *Oh, I'd flirt with you, all right...if Nick wasn't busy doing it already.*

Derek had been joined by a short black woman, who eyed him with a no-nonsense gaze. He didn't notice. He was, predictably, watching Nick. The newcomer snorted in amusement. "He's about as subtle as a kid in a candy store, huh?"

Derek jerked his head back around and glared. "Shut up, Penny, and order a damn beer."

Penny's humor didn't fade as she slid onto the stool next to him, offering her hand to Mackenzie. "You must be the new girl. I'm Penny."

"Hi." The woman's grip was strong, her smile open and friendly. "What can I get you to drink?"

"Just a Coke, thanks. I've got to pick my kids up from soccer practice in a half hour."

"Poor kids," Derek grumbled, and Mackenzie could have sworn he was *blushing*. "Do they know their mom's a—"

"Oh, finish that sentence. I *dare* you."

Mackenzie laughed as she poured Penny's soda, mostly at the way Derek's mouth snapped shut. He stood almost a foot

taller than Penny, but he didn't look like he was ready to take her dare.

The woman snorted again as she took her drink from Mackenzie. "You gotta watch the men around here, honey. They're all reasonably pleasant to look at, and it makes them uppity. Especially this one."

"Excuse me, I don't think—"

"He's in here all the time," Penny continued as if Derek hadn't spoken. "Rumor has it little Nicole might even be sweet on him. Or she hates his guts. No one can quite tell which."

Mackenzie glanced at Nick again, but her eyes were once more drawn to the man across the bar from her. Something about him appealed to her, something that made her wish life was normal enough for her to consider dating and men. The sudden longing for a life without fear overwhelmed her, and she braced her hands against the bar to hide their shaking.

Penny's sharp eyes saw far too much. Mackenzie could tell she was about to ask if she was all right, but Derek interrupted with another well-timed grumble of protest. "For your information, I was absolutely going to ask Mackenzie out before you came in here and cramped my style."

Mackenzie seized on his words and pulled her public persona back into place. No matter how scared she was, she couldn't afford to let it show. It made people ask questions, ones she could ill afford to answer. So she winked at Derek.

“Maybe I would have said yes, but now I know better. I can’t take the chance that you’ll get me in trouble with my boss.”

“Oh, but maybe I’d be worth it.” Derek’s waggled eyebrows were so absurdly overdone Mackenzie couldn’t help but laugh. He obviously flirted for the same reason she did—because people expected it of him. It made it a lot less dangerous to play along.

She leaned across the counter and lowered her voice. “I think you’re too much trouble for me to handle, Derek Gabriel. I’m going to listen to your friend’s advice and steer clear.”

“Anyone who gives pretty women advice to steer clear is *not* a friend,” Derek replied stoutly, making a face at Penny.

Penny just rolled her eyes. “God save me from fools.”

It was so fun, so *normal*. Joking, laughing... The yearning returned, stronger than ever. Mackenzie could make a life here, with people like this. She could—

She fought sudden tears, blinking them back as she hefted a nearby tub of dirty glasses. “I’ll be in the kitchen if you need anything. Anything that *won’t* get me fired.”

Penny’s laughter followed her. As handsome as he was, it wasn’t Derek she found herself thinking of as she stood inside the doors, taking a moment to gather herself. The eyes she couldn’t seem to get out of her head were the shockingly blue

ones belonging to the stranger who'd been speaking with Nick.

Even though she knew dating was off-limits, she found herself oddly disappointed when she returned to the front several minutes later only to find him gone.

Chapter Two

A few months ago, Mackenzie wouldn't have noticed the man following her.

Of course, a few months ago, Mackenzie had never *been* followed before, not with any real dedication. From time to time a customer looking to score would wait for her outside the bar, but she'd had no trouble dissuading them from following her home.

Then Marcus had walked into her life, and a whole new world of paranoia opened up for her. She'd gotten very good at noticing a footstep where one shouldn't be, and even better at remembering faces she saw a bit too often to be coincidence.

It was a credit to her stalker's skill that she didn't notice him at first. She'd walked almost a quarter mile toward her motel before she realized anyone was following her at all, a fact which chilled her to the bone. It was so dark she couldn't see more than a vague outline—tall and lean, wearing nothing fancier than jeans and a T-shirt. That reassured her at first, since all of Marcus's men had all worn the same black slacks

and button-down shirts, some sort of quasi-uniform straight from the pages of Creepy Insane Stalker Monthly.

Her relief faded when she walked another quarter mile and caught sight of him again. She *knew* she was being followed.

What she didn't know was why. The small container of pepper spray in her pocket gave her the courage to turn and face him, and she made no attempt to hide her suspicion. She didn't move, didn't speak, just stared challengingly at him and waited to see if he would step into the circle of light cast by the streetlight above.

He did. "Busted, huh?" he drawled, one hand rubbing at the strong line of his chin.

She started when she recognized the man from the bar, the handsome one who'd been talking to Nick. He was taller than she'd realized, with broad shoulders and an easy grace. Though it was blanched and yellowed by the harsh glare of the streetlight, she clearly remembered the sandy shade of his brown hair, and the startling blue of his eyes.

He was gorgeous, all right, but that didn't mean he wasn't dangerous. Marcus had been gorgeous too. So she did her best to ignore his looks as she curled her fingers around the pepper spray in her pocket. "Why are you following me?"

He took a step closer. “Your boss asked me to. She was...well, I suppose ‘concerned’ is probably as good a word as any.”

Nervousness drove her back a few paces, and she immediately regretted showing fear. She straightened and struggled to reclaim her challenging expression. “Nick told you to follow me?”

His voice softened, turned almost gentle. “She was worried you didn’t have anyplace to go, and she said you’ve been acting jumpy. Like maybe you were in trouble?”

“I have a place to stay.” The response came too fast, too forced, and she almost cringed at how defensive she sounded. He didn’t look like the sort of man who would consider her motel an appropriate dwelling. *She* didn’t like it either, but it was all she could afford on her limited budget.

He was still watching her, so she moderated her tone. “It’s nice that you’re worried, but I’m fine. I promise.”

He stared at her as if considering the veracity of her words. “All right. But at least let me walk you home.” His lips curled into a charming smile that made her heart beat faster. “Don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we’re not in the best neighborhood at the moment.”

Mackenzie opened her mouth to turn down his offer. The last thing she needed right now was trouble, and the absolute best-case scenario involved him talking to Nick about how

unsuitable her current living quarters were. But when her gaze found his again, the words died on her tongue.

She *should* say no, but she didn't want to. Loneliness and fear had become so ingrained that she sometimes wondered if she remembered how to feel anything else. His presence would give her the illusion of companionship, for however short a time. Something about his eyes made her want to trust him, made her long to tell him everything that had happened. *Or maybe I just want to tell someone so I won't have to be alone.*

She wasn't ready to trust him with the truth, but she could let him walk her home. "What's your name?"

He took another step forward and held out his hand. "I'm Jackson. Jackson Holt."

If she wanted to shake his hand, she'd have to let go of the pepper spray in her pocket and give up the only chance she'd have of getting away if he tried to hurt her. She looked at his face, at his smile, but most of all at those astoundingly blue eyes.

She slowly uncurled her fingers. The pepper spray stayed in the pocket of her sweatshirt as she pulled out her hand and offered it to him. "I'm Mackenzie."

Jackson tried not to let his dismay show as he accompanied Mackenzie farther from the bar and the French

Quarter. Her walk home had brought them into one of the worst-damaged areas left over from Hurricane Katrina, and block after block revealed the same thing—rows of shotgun houses and closed businesses, gutted and awaiting restoration. They'd long since left the acceptable tourist spots behind, leading him to believe the curvy woman keeping her distance beside him either hadn't done her homework or was running short of cash.

He shook himself with a silent grumble. He just had to see her home, somehow manage to get himself home without getting rolled for his wallet and shot, and he could report his findings to Nick in the morning. His and Alec's bar tab would be cut in half, and he'd have done Nick a solid.

So what if his eyes kept flickering back to Mackenzie and her lustrous hair? She'd been wearing it in a twist when he'd seen her at Mahalia's, but the hairdo had given way to a sloppy ponytail. Though still pulled up, it was easy to see that, unbound, the shining mass would damn near reach her waist. He'd never been much for long hair, but it worked on her.

"So," he said, mostly to distract himself from wondering whether it was as soft as it looked. "Where are you from?" He couldn't detect much of an accent.

If he hadn't been watching her hair so closely, he wouldn't have seen her shoulders stiffen. Silence stretched out

between them before she grudgingly replied, “I was born in Seattle.”

It wasn’t really an answer. “Washington’s nice,” he said easily. “I’m from Georgia myself. Went to college in Florida, moved here. I wanted to stay in the South, and New Orleans seemed like a logical choice. It’s a good place for people like us.”

She glanced at him, her expression confused. “People like us? Are you a bartender?”

He searched her eyes for signs of recognition or evasiveness, but they were clear, guileless. *Interesting*. “Free spirits,” he explained.

“Ah.” She slipped her hands back into the pockets of her sweatshirt. August in New Orleans was anything but cold, even after dark, and the sweatshirt looked out of place. So did the way she curled in on herself as if cold or, more likely, scared.

Odd. If she was a shapeshifter, like Nick thought, it didn’t make sense for her to seem so frightened. Shifters could generally fend for themselves pretty well, no matter the circumstances.

He recalled his conversation with Nick. “I get the vague sense that she’s like me, but different,” she’d said.

Her words had prompted a snort from him. “That’s not very helpful, Peyton. Can you be more specific?”

“A shifter,” she’d said finally, “but not a wolf. Maybe something else.”

Something else. Even in a city like New Orleans, which was full of supernaturals mostly trying to live quiet lives of peace and secrecy, it was all but impossible to find a shifter who wasn’t a wolf. Through birth or transformation, their ranks had grown, while other breeds’ numbers had dwindled. Still, if Nick sensed magic within Mackenzie, he trusted her instincts.

So why hadn’t she looked the slightest bit nervous or intrigued when he’d made the comment about people like them?

Jackson briefly considered casting his seeing spell on her to determine her true nature, but dismissed the idea. If she had any magical heritage at all, she’d know he’d done *something*, if not exactly what, and he might find himself in somewhat of a pickle.

Despite his musings, he didn’t drop his easy, crooked grin, didn’t betray the thoughts whirling madly through his head. His placid exterior was part of what made him very, very good at his job. It had kept him alive on more than one occasion.

Mackenzie remained silent until she stopped in front of a building with a visible flood line etched three feet high on the ground floor wall. It looked as though it shouldn’t have been

in use anymore. The lights on the sign had blown out but, squinting, he could make out what had once been a sign for a motel before graffiti, vandalism and storm damage had taken their toll.

A small alley lay between the building and the one next to it, obviously leading back to the parking lot and rooms. It was there that she hesitated, glancing into the dimly lit alley with a self-conscious grimace that told him more clearly than words she was aware how bad it looked. Her eyes didn't quite meet his as she cleared her throat. "This is my place."

"Oh, you've *got* to be kidding me." Jackson didn't realize he'd spoken aloud until Mackenzie flinched and shot him a mortified look. "Sorry," he mumbled. "I just... Damn, Kenzie." The nickname rolled off his tongue, unbidden. "If I leave you here, Nick'll skin me alive." *And I won't sleep a wink for worrying.*

"I've been here four nights already," she said, averting her eyes. "I've been fine."

Jackson crossed his arms over his chest. "Just because you've been fine so far doesn't mean you're going to stay that way." He tapped his chin. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to stay somewhere else tonight?"

If anything, she looked even more uncomfortable. "I know you're trying to help, but it's late and I wouldn't have any idea where to go. I've already paid for tonight."

“There’s a small apartment above the bar. It’s where Mahalia lived when she owned the place. You could stay there.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I thought Nick owned the bar. How can you offer to let me stay there?” She probably didn’t even realize that she’d taken a step back from him, but Jackson noticed.

He kept his voice soothing. “Nick is my best friend. She wouldn’t want you to be here, that’s for damn sure. I think she’d want you to stay there until you find a better place.”

The fight seemed to melt out of her, leaving her looking exhausted. She finally met his eyes, and gave him a tired, self-conscious smile. “Honestly? I don’t think I’m up to walking all the way back there tonight.”

“So I’ll call a cab. Hell, I’ll call my partner if I have to. He won’t like having his tired old ass dragged out of bed, but I’ll do it.”

Mackenzie stared at him for a long time, studying his face as if she could read his intentions. Then she nodded once. “If you don’t mind calling a cab, I can go and get my bag.”

There was no way in hell he was letting her go to her room alone. “I don’t really want to wait here by myself. Would it be all right if I came and waited outside the door?”

“Okay.” She tilted her head toward the dark driveway. “It’s back this way.”

Jackson already had his phone out. He dialed information absently, the bulk of his attention focused on every noise in the dim alley. As confident as he was in his ability to take care of himself and Mackenzie, he didn't relish the thought of getting caught off his guard. But they reached the top of the rickety staircase without incident.

A man stood by the landing, leaning against the wall next to a defaced sign entreating the guests not to smoke. He had a cigarette in his mouth, but pulled it out to leer at Mackenzie when she walked by. He caught sight of Jackson and the expression faded, replaced by surprise and then wary resentment.

Mackenzie appeared to ignore him, but Jackson could see how tight her shoulders were as she walked to the second door and slipped a key out of her pocket.

"Evening," Jackson said with a nod, taking care to follow Mackenzie closely.

The man glared at Jackson and ground out his cigarette on the sign next to his head. His dark gaze slid to Mackenzie, who struggled to work the rusty key into the lock with hands that shook.

Jackson answered the man's glare with a bland look and stepped forward. "Let me." He reached around and took the key from her trembling hand. The lock yielded easily. "I'll be right here."

She was close enough for him to feel her shiver before she slipped away, still moving with that surprising grace though obviously exhausted and terrified.

Jackson spoke into his cell phone, asking to be connected to the first cab-company listing. The sooner he got Mackenzie out of here, the better.

*

Mackenzie was fumbling through her bag for her envelope of cash when she looked up to see Jackson pass several folded bills through the cab's window. The cabbie handed him a slip of paper in return and pulled away, leaving Mackenzie on the sidewalk with the money in her hand.

She stepped forward and held it out. "Here. I was going to pay for the cab."

He shook his head. "Got a receipt. It's a tax-deductible business expense."

"Oh." Even if it was just his way of making her feel better about accepting his charity, she was too tired to argue. She shoved the money back into her duffel bag and swung the strap onto her shoulder. "So where do I need to go?"

He nodded to the Spanish-style brick building that housed the bar. "There's a staircase around back that leads to the apartment. Come on. I'll show you."

He led her around the corner and up the sturdy, wrought-iron stairs. “Wait here,” he said on the landing. “I need to see if I can find the key.” He fumbled around the doorjamb before kneeling and lifting a potted fern. “Here we go.” His broad shoulders blocked her view as he opened the door with a click. He stepped back and gestured her in.

For a moment Mackenzie stood on the landing and watched him, fear and paranoia battling with the desperate need to sleep in a safe place. The bar was located in a quieter part of the Quarter, and most of the surrounding buildings housed residences or businesses that had long since closed for the day; walking into the apartment would put her at Jackson’s mercy. It was unlikely anyone would come to her aid if she called for help.

Then again, no one would have *cared* if she’d called for help at the motel. If Jackson had wanted to hurt her, he’d had ample opportunity. She didn’t know if he made her feel safe or if she just didn’t have the energy to care anymore, but she nodded and walked into the apartment.

The small entry gave way to a kitchen and living area, everything decorated in bright, welcoming colors. After a string of motels that had started at cheap and nosedived to trashy, the sight brought tears to her eyes.

Jackson stood there, one hand on the edge of the open door. “I hope you’re not hungry. There probably isn’t any

food in the fridge, though you might be able to find something in the pantry.” He scratched the back of his head and furrowed his brow. “You could always order in. The phone should be in working order.”

“I’m fine,” she said quietly, hoping he wouldn’t hear the slight tremor in her voice. She moved slowly into the living room, dropping the bag by the side of the couch. She surreptitiously wiped her eyes, turned and sat. “Are you sure Nick isn’t going to mind?”

He shook his head and spoke, his voice low. “Nick won’t mind. She’ll be glad you stayed someplace safe.” His grin was encouraging. “Hey, you’re not likely to be late for work tomorrow.”

His smile was as irresistible as his eyes, and she found herself wishing she had an excuse to get him to stay a while longer.

Don’t be stupid, she reminded herself sharply as she pulled her gaze from his. *Now is not the time for distractions*. She couldn’t get involved with him. At best, it would make it hard to move on when she needed to. And if Marcus showed up while they were together...

He was too nice a man to get tangled up in her problems, so she met his eyes again and tried to show gratitude in her expression without letting anything else creep in. “Thank you,

Jackson. It—it's really nice that you and Nick are helping me out. I promise I'll find someplace else to stay."

"Sure," he said easily, rocking the door back and forth absently. "I'll call Nick in the morning and tell her you're here, so don't worry about that. Bolt the door behind me. Sleep well, Mackenzie." He disappeared, and the door closed with a gentle click.

Mackenzie let out the breath she'd been holding. Exhaustion dragged at her as she made her way to the door to lock the deadbolt and back to the couch, and she sank back into the plush cushion with a soft sigh. *I'll just sit here a few minutes...*

In moments, she was curled comfortably on her side, her head resting on a bright blue cushion. For the first time since Marcus had found her over a month ago, she drifted to sleep feeling safe, comfortable, and almost hopeful.

Jackson leaned against the lamp post and scratched his arm as he looked at the second-floor windows of Mahalia's old apartment. The lights hadn't gone off, but he hoped Mackenzie was getting some rest, anyway. She'd almost fallen asleep in the taxi back from her crappy motel, even though it was obvious she was fresh out of trust for strangers.

A handful of people walked past, almost knocking into him, and Jackson stepped back automatically, his mind on the

woman upstairs. She'd been so skittish he hadn't wanted her to look out and see him on the street, so he'd thrown up a quick shield, something to shadow him from most people's sight. It was a trick Mahalia herself had taught him, back before she'd decided to retire to Boca Raton and make him learn all his magic the hard way, from dusty old books that tended to fall apart on him and make his eyes water.

There was no doubt in his mind Mackenzie was on the run from something, though he'd bet anyone a hundred bucks it was *someone*. An old boyfriend, perhaps, or a husband. Some overprotective, possessive asshole, maybe even an abusive one. His fists clenched at the thought. Surely if she was a shapeshifter, as Nick had suggested, she could have taken care of such a situation. Or maybe the hypothetical guy was just as strong, or stronger. It made sense.

Except that she really had seemed clueless when he'd tossed out that line about people like them. That part didn't make so much sense. He resolved to ask Alec to take a look at Mackenzie. His partner was fifteen years older than Nick, and his shapeshifter instincts were more refined. He should be able to settle the question.

What wouldn't be so easy to settle was why Jackson could still remember the striking cobalt shade of her eyes, or the way she moved like the same gravity that affected everyone else couldn't quite reach her.

He scratched his head and huffed in disgust. He was standing under a streetlight, waxing poetic about the shade of a stranger's eyes. Add a show tune or two, and his already bizarre life was headed straight for the theatre of the absurd.

Chapter Three

Jackson growled and balanced a coffee tray and a paper bag in one hand as he tugged open the office door. “Morning,” he said dourly as he walked in and dropped the bag on the small table that held the cold, empty coffee maker. “I stopped by Café du Monde on the way in and bought beignets.”

The young woman behind the receptionist’s desk looked him over before raising an eyebrow. “I thought Alec was the one staking out crazy husband dude. Did something go down last night that you both needed to handle?”

“No, Katherine.” He placed a coffee cup on her desk and laid the tray on his own. “I was working on something else.”

“What were you—” Her words cut off as the door opened again and Jackson’s partner shoved through it, looking even less cheerful than Jackson felt.

Alec also held a coffee tray and paper bag, which he raised as the door swung shut. “I stopped by Café du Monde and got...” His gaze fell on the bag beside the coffee maker and jumped to Jackson. “Shit, what the hell happened to you?”

“He was working on something else,” Kat supplied helpfully, an amused glint in her light blue eyes. The look she flashed Jackson was downright mischievous. “So Alec doesn’t know about this mysterious other job?”

Jackson dropped into his leather chair, his elbows hitting the desk as he rubbed his eyes. “I was doing Nick Peyton a favor. Well, not exactly. She’s cutting our bar tab in half as payment.”

“In half? Must have been quite a favor.” Alec dumped a second cup of coffee on Kat’s desk and sank into his own chair with an inhuman grace Jackson found particularly offensive, considering the fact that Alec had not only also been up all night, but had more than ten years on him to begin with.

“Mmm. She hired someone new, but the woman’s been acting kind of squirrely, so Nick wanted me to make sure she had a decent place to stay. Turned out, she had a room in some condemned roach motel upriver.”

“Where’s she staying now?”

Jackson hesitated. Alec had been his partner for five years, and the man was bound to take his next revelation the wrong way. “I took her back to Mahalia’s and let her into the apartment upstairs.”

Alec’s eyebrows rose, but it was Kat who spoke. “And since Café du Monde was on your way into work, that must

mean you stayed there.” There was *far* too much amusement in her voice.

“Yeah, I stayed there,” he replied irritably. “Outside, in the company of my favorite streetlamp, which is why I look like sun-dried crap, and not like some guy who got lucky last night. So shut up already.”

“Did you figure out why she’s so squirrely?” Alec shot Kat a quelling look Jackson probably wasn’t supposed to see.

“Nope. I’ve got a good idea, though.” Jackson flipped through his address cards and picked up the phone.

Alec took another sip of his coffee. “Gonna share?”

“Uh-uh.”

Blissful silence filled the office for a full five seconds before Alec snorted in exasperation. “Jesus. You’ve got the hots for her, don’t you?”

Jackson shot him an exasperated look of his own and put down the phone. “Not everything in my life is about sex, Jacobson. I just figure it’s none of your damn business, that’s all.”

“If you’re doing a job, it’s my business. You were supposed to be sleeping last night so one of us would be ready to deal with the fallout on the Smith case this morning. Now *your* personal business is screwing up *my* professional business.”

“*Is* there fallout to deal with?”

Alec pulled a slim camera from his jacket pocket and held it up. “As soon as Kat pulls the pictures off of here, you can see how much. The man’s not subtle. I’m not surprised his wife figured out exactly what he was up to.”

Jackson was glad he’d already called Nick to update her on Mackenzie’s status and whereabouts. “Let me guess. Cocktail waitress? Exotic dancer?”

“Secretary. It’s always the secretary.” Alec turned his dark gaze on Kat and flashed her a wicked smile. “Why is that, Kat?”

Jackson watched in amusement as Kat snatched the camera from Alec’s hand with a dangerous look. “Don’t ask me. I wouldn’t get mixed up with you if you paid me. Oh wait, you do.” She handled the camera with speed and familiarity, her fingers flying over the buttons. She plugged a cord from her computer into the side of the camera and pulled her keyboard toward her. “Now, *Jackson*, on the other hand... I’d get mixed up with him for sure. Especially if he made me Italian food.”

Alec scowled. “You are too popular with the ladies for your own damn good, Holt.”

“Don’t I know it.” He thought about Mackenzie and how she hadn’t seemed the slightest bit interested in him. “Then again, maybe not.”

Alec looked like he was going to say something, but Kat let out a sudden choked noise and pushed her chair back from her desk. “Holy crap, Alec. I’m never giving you the camera with the good zoom lens again.”

The pictures on her computer were gritty and explicit enough to leave no doubt about their client’s husband’s extramarital activities. His lurid affair with his secretary was splashed over Kat’s flat-screen monitor. In detail. Maybe *too much* detail.

Alec laughed. “Didn’t have to zoom much. They were right next to the window, and I can move pretty quietly when I want to.”

Jackson leaned over Kat’s shoulder. “Looks like our society matron could have been absolutely right to be concerned about that huge life-insurance policy.” He whistled and accidentally nudged Kat’s purse aside, revealing a copy of the *Delta Examiner*, a regional tabloid newspaper. “Oh, Kat. Alec, look what Kat’s reading.”

She tried to snatch away the tabloid, but Alec’s shapeshifter reflexes made him impossibly fast, even when he was exhausted. He grabbed the paper and frowned. “Oh, hell. You’d better have a good excuse for this, Katherine Gabriel, or I may fire your ass.”

“It’s funny,” she retorted, her cheeks bright red. “I like reading the stories about the so-called supernatural conspiracy.

This one has an article about a secret cabal of psychics who control the government.” She sniffed. “No one invited *me* to join.”

Jackson laughed. “Maybe they don’t need any soft-hearted empaths.” He looked at the paper over Alec’s shoulder. “Yep, there’s your nemesis. C.E. Miller, the great paranormal whistle-blower.”

Alec’s scowl deepened as he flipped open the tabloid to the page listed and skimmed the article. “It’s not funny. We survive by flying beneath the radar. Whoever this clown is, he’s fucking shit up for everyone. Every damn week he manages to latch on to the latest gossip in the supernatural world and spew it over the pages of this rag. He *has* to be one of us, or he wouldn’t always know what’s going on.”

“Right.” Jackson walked over to the table and opened a bag of beignets. “‘Cause everyone believes that stuff. Especially the thing about that secret cabal of psychics.” He took a bite of the fried dough, careful not to inhale any powdered sugar. “Someone get this guy a Pulitzer, already.”

Looking disgusted, Alec tossed the paper back on Kat’s desk. “Some day, when I’ve got some free time, I’m going to track that man down and have words with him. If he just wants money, he could write the same UFO and Bigfoot shit as everyone else. He doesn’t have to publish stuff that’s real.”

Jackson brought Kat a beignet on a napkin. “Suppose you’re right, Alec, and he’s one of us. He could belong to one of the factions that *wants* exposure, even if it’s dangerous.”

“All the more reason for me to track him down,” Alec said darkly. He sank into his chair with a glance at Jackson. “Is this job we’re doing for Nick going to keep you busy today? I can go talk to the husband, but I’ll need to bring Kat with me to work her mojo.”

Jackson almost told him that, technically, he was finished with his favor for Nick. “Actually, yeah. I’m going to check some things out. Why don’t you give me a call when you’re done with the husband? I need you and Kat to take a gander at Nick’s new employee, if that’s all right.”

Kat made a face. “God, just promise me it’s the last time I have to see that slimeball husband. I always feel like I need a shower after reading him.”

Jackson started flipping through a stack of mail. “Alec won’t make you go back, Kat,” he promised absently. “No more gold-digging, slimeball husbands for at least a week.”

She shuddered. “I am *never* getting married. Never.”

Though the sentiment wasn’t far from his own feelings on the subject, Jackson thought about his parents and their nearly thirty-five years of wedded bliss. “Find the right guy, Kat, and you won’t have to worry about him wanting to bump you off for money.”

“Plus I’d have to actually have a lot of money first,” She pulled her chair back to her desk. The phone rang, and she wrinkled her nose as she slipped on her headset. “Holt and Jacobson Investigations. How can I help you?”

Jackson threw away half the stack of mail and tossed some of the remaining correspondence on Alec’s desk. “Will you be finished with the husband by around two this afternoon?”

Alec scratched at the side of his beard as he stared past Jackson in thought. “Should be. Depends on what Kat gets from him, though. You want us to swing by Mahalia’s when we get done?”

“That’d work. I can’t quite figure this one out.”

“Yeah, me either,” Alec commiserated. “Of course, that could be because you haven’t told me a damn thing aside from the fact that Nick hired some hot chick who was staying in a crap motel.”

Jackson blinked and flushed. How could he have forgotten to share with Alec the most important fact of all? “Nick thinks she’s a shapeshifter, but not a wolf. I can’t get a bead on her.”

“Apparently,” Alec drawled dryly. “She’s scrambled your brains but good, man. I can come by and take a look, and Kat will be able to give you an idea of what shape she’s in emotionally.”

Jackson focused on his planner. “I’ve got to meet an informant in about fifteen minutes. Give me a call when you’re headed to Mahalia’s.” He grabbed his cell phone and coffee. “Be careful with the husband. They freak out sometimes when they know they’re busted.”

“Yeah, I’ll take care of Kat.”

Jackson paused by her desk, held up the tabloid and grinned mischievously. “By the way? Last week, Miller wrote an article about the vampire underground here in the Big Easy. So cheer up. He’s not right about *everything*.”

Alec just snorted. “Thank God. If this town had vampires, I might throw myself in the damn Mississippi.”

A gentle knock woke Mackenzie, jerking her rather unpleasantly from a dream about Jackson and his strong arms. Fear froze her in place for one endless moment while she stared at the door and imagined all of the ways Marcus could have found her. Blood pounded in her ears as panic shot through her, leaving nothing behind it but the desperate need to escape.

The knock sounded again, louder this time, and she heard a friendly female voice on the other side of the door. “Mackenzie? It’s Nick.”

Feeling foolish, Mackenzie rose from the couch and crossed the living room. When she pulled the door open, she

found her boss on the other side, looking so harmless it made her panic seem absurd. She stepped back so Nick could come inside. “Did—did Jackson call you? He told me it would be okay for me to stay here for the night.”

“Yeah, he called me this morning.” She lifted a heavy-looking paper sack. “I brought some things. Can I come in?”

“Of course. But you didn’t need to bring me anything. Really, Nick, it’s enough that you let me stay here last night.”

“Oh, it isn’t much.” Nick dropped the sack on the counter and started to unload it. “Just a few staples. Did you sleep well?”

Mackenzie’s eyes darted guiltily to the couch and back. “I did. It’s a beautiful apartment. But I told Jackson I’d find someplace else to stay tonight, so you really don’t have to—” She watched helplessly as Nick pulled milk out of the bag and set it in the fridge. “I can’t pay you enough to stay here.”

Nick wrinkled her nose and straightened her red tank top. “Don’t worry about that. The place is just sitting here, empty.”

It was the same easy, casual way Jackson had offered help, and it was too good to be true. “Nick, I’m serious. You’ve already done so much.”

The short woman heaved a sigh and pulled a bag of coffee out of the grocery sack. She seemed pensive as she rinsed the carafe from the coffee maker. “Okay, fair enough. How about

if I don't pay you? You can work for tips and stay here, keep an eye on the place."

Mackenzie finally asked the one question she'd been wondering since Jackson had taken an interest in her welfare the night before. "Why?"

Nick leaned against the cabinets and tapped manicured nails on the countertop. "Honestly? You seem like you need help. If I have the means to provide it but choose not to, what does that say about me?" She pulled a charm-style keychain from her pocket and held it out. On the ring was a single key. "Let me do this. That way, I won't feel like a complete drain on society."

The simple honesty of the statement soothed Mackenzie's suspicions like nothing else had. She walked into the kitchen and accepted the key. "Okay. I'll work for tips and keep an eye on the place." It was more than she'd been paying for the cheap hotel, but not nearly as much as she should have paid. Nick had to have known the bulk of Mackenzie's income came from tips, anyway, and losing her hourly wage wouldn't make much of a difference.

"All right, then." Nick opened a cabinet and pulled out two oversized mugs. "Want a café au lait?"

"Sure." Mackenzie retrieved the milk from the fridge, noting that Nick had also brought vegetables, fruit and cheese. "Is Jackson an investigator or something? He's pretty good at

following people without getting noticed.” She tried to sound subtle, but had a feeling she’d failed.

Nick’s grin confirmed her suspicions. “Yeah, he’s a private investigator. He and his partner, Alec, spend a lot of time at the bar. Jackson was close to the lady who owned it before me.” She bit her lip, suddenly looking contrite. “I’m sorry I had him follow you, but I didn’t really believe you when you said you had a place to stay. It was wrong of me, but I was worried.”

“It was a little startling.” As if the sheer panic that had gripped her the night before could be considered “a little” anything. “He was a perfect gentleman, though, once he stopped stalking me in the shadows and all.”

“He usually is.” Nick eyed Mackenzie shrewdly. “Quite the looker too, hmm?”

Mackenzie felt the corner of her mouth quirk up, and was almost surprised she could still smile. It was real, not one of the fake ones she plastered on while working. “You seem to have a lot of lookers hanging out in your bar.”

Nick hooted as she filled a small pan with milk and set it on the range over gentle heat. “That’s an understatement. My bar is chock-full of hot men, that’s what it is. I should start advertising that way.”

“The women would never leave.” Mackenzie relaxed more and found herself praying the car she’d abandoned

outside of Memphis held the key to how Marcus had been tracking her. Maybe the nightmare would be over for a while. She could catch her breath and try to make sense of the shambles of her life.

More than that, Mackenzie wondered if this was the kind of place she could stay. It was easy to imagine being friends with Nick, working at the bar, maybe even finding a place where she could get a job giving dance lessons again. *And maybe get to know Jackson...*

Nick filled two of the mugs half full of coffee and slowly added the heated milk. “Mahalia’s could be the first official New Orleans meat market. Wouldn’t my father just love that?”

Mackenzie reached out for the mug that Nick proffered. “Your father doesn’t like you owning a bar?” Mackenzie’s father had paid for her to go to bartending school, reasoning that anyone with a fine arts degree in dance should have something to fall back on. Her parents hadn’t been wild about her career choice, but they’d been supportive.

Nick snorted and shook her head. “He thinks I should be heading museum committees in Manhattan and looking for the perfect society husband, not running a watering hole in the French Quarter.”

“That must be rough.” She said it because she wasn’t sure what else *to* say. Growing up in suburban South Dakota had

hardly prepared her to discuss the foibles of high society, which was obviously where Nick had come from. Somehow Mackenzie doubted that the way her adoptive parents had spoiled her growing up would be considered ostentatious by a woman whose destiny had included museum committees.

Nick just waved a hand as she carried her mug to the small round table in the middle of the bright yellow kitchen. “It isn’t rough, and if I ever say it is, smack me. When you’ve had everything you’ve ever wanted, whining about your life is just bratty.”

“Hey, it’s still hard. My parents weren’t exactly thrilled when their daughter decided she wanted to study dance instead of engineering like her father. But they still helped me find the money to do it.” And somewhere in the apartment she’d abandoned was a picture of her parents at her graduation, her mother already frail from the cancer that would kill her two months later but beaming with so much pride.

Nick’s mouth curved into a slight frown. “They’re not around anymore?”

“No. They were older when they adopted me. My dad was almost forty-five already. My mom was younger, but when she got sick the stress was horrible on both of them...” Mackenzie let her voice trail off and shrugged one shoulder. “She got to see me graduate, though. Then she made my dad pay for bartending school so I’d have a way to eat while I tried

to make a living dancing. And my dad came to every dance audition I had until the day he died.”

“They sound wonderful.”

“They were.” And the thought of how desperately she could have used her mother’s unwavering affection and her father’s pragmatic good sense over the past month was going to reduce her to tears if she didn’t change the subject. “I was really lucky. Even when they didn’t agree with me, they always supported me.”

“Who needs parental support when you have a bar full good-looking men?” Nick proved herself plenty intuitive with a swift subject change. “Speaking of... What did you think of Jackson? Besides being blown over by his keen investigative skills, that is?”

“He was nice.” She dropped into the chair across from Nick and tucked her feet under her. “Like I said, a perfect gentleman. Don’t meet a lot of those these days.”

Nick nodded too casually and played with the end of her ponytail. “I try not to keep them around if they don’t have any manners. But Jackson’s a good egg. His partner is too, though not nearly as...affable.” She sipped her coffee. “I let them run up a huge tab at the bar. That way, whenever I need something, they have to pony up ’cause they owe me. It’s Machiavellian, isn’t it?”

Mackenzie laughed. It seemed like it had been forever since she'd laughed as easily as she had in the last few days. "It's brilliant, if you ask me. You can never have too many hot men owing you favors."

"That's what I'm saying." Nick tilted her head. "I heard you made quite an impression on Derek Gabriel."

Uh-oh. Mackenzie shook her head. "He was just trying to annoy his friend. Penny, I think?"

Nick shrugged, but her cheeks colored. "Hey, Gabriel's not bad, either. If you like him, you should go out with him."

Well, that answered the question of how Nick felt about Derek. After the past month, it seemed almost surreal to be sharing coffee with another woman and talking about men, but something about it felt *normal*, too. "I'm not really in a place where I should be going out with people." *Don't you forget that, Mackenzie Brooks.*

"You may feel differently after a couple of weeks." The look in Nick's dark eyes was sharp and assessing. "I've got to get downstairs and do some inventory. Can you come down around two?"

"Sure. Thanks, Nick. For everything."

Nick took her mug to the sink to rinse it. "You're welcome, Mackenzie. See you in a bit." She crossed the room to the door and smiled before stepping through. The door

closed behind her with a soft click, leaving Mackenzie alone with her thoughts.

She finished her coffee and rinsed her cup before giving in to curiosity and peering into the bag Nick had left on the counter. Several bottles sat inside, along with a new toothbrush and a small tube of toothpaste. She pulled them out one at a time, admiring Nick's expensive taste in shampoo and conditioner. The body wash was labeled "Summer Rain" and smelled fresh and wonderful. There was even a tiny container of bubble bath.

She lifted out a pink loofah and imagined taking her first bath in over a month. Not a quick shower in a dingy hotel room but a real bath, with hot water and privacy and no bugs crawling over the floor or strangers banging on the walls.

She gathered the toiletries and wandered back to the bathroom. It was bright and clean, and it looked like heaven. After closing the door, Mackenzie turned on the tub and resolved that, if nothing else, she was going to spend the rest of the morning in mindless luxury.

Maybe, if she was lucky, she could drift back to sleep and dream of Jackson Holt and his beautiful eyes again.

Chapter Four

Jackson stared at the etched silver letters on the picture window and sighed. He'd arrived early, even though Nick had told him Mackenzie wouldn't be down until two o'clock, and had even pondered circling the corner and climbing the staircase to the apartment above.

He was losing his mind.

He glanced down the street in both directions, squinting in the afternoon light. Alec and Kat hadn't called yet, and they were nowhere in sight. With another small sigh, he pushed open the door.

Mackenzie must have been early, because she stood behind the bar, humming absently and wiping it with a white cloth. Her hair was up again, and she was dressed more formally than Nick, in a blue button-up shirt tailored to skim her curves. When the bell above the door rang, she looked his way.

She smiled, the expression far friendlier than the one she'd given him the day before. "Hey, Jackson."

He grinned as he approached the bar and eased onto a stool. “Mackenzie. You seem like you’re breathing a little easier already.”

“I am,” she admitted, folding the towel neatly on the counter. “Can I get you something?”

“Whatever soft drink’s handy.” He grabbed a handful of pretzels from a nearby bowl. “I’m working. My partner and our assistant will be here in a bit, actually. I’d like for you to meet them.”

She poured his soda, and when she turned back her easy smile had vanished, replaced by the tense, brittle one from the previous day. “Oh yeah? You guys have a big case or something?”

“Not really. We’re finishing one up now, but everything else we’ve got going on is pretty small-time.” He took the glass she offered. “They just want to meet Nick’s new hire.”

For a moment he thought she was going to take him at his word, but her lips flattened into a hard line. “If that’s all it is, I’m happy to meet them. And I don’t want you to think I don’t appreciate everything you did for me last night, Jackson. I do. But—” She hesitated, and the weary exhaustion in her eyes made his chest ache with sympathy. “I’m not a great person to get tangled up with right now. I don’t want people who are trying to help me to end up hurt.”

He leaned closer. “Mackenzie, if you’re in trouble, we can help. You don’t have to worry about us getting hurt, either. That’s what—” The bell above the door rang again, and Jackson shut his mouth as Mackenzie turned to the new arrivals with a smile pasted on her face.

“Shit!” It was Alec’s voice, and Jackson turned just in time to see his partner catch Kat as she staggered. Her face had blanched, and her wide blue eyes fastened on Mackenzie with something akin to shock. Jackson had seen the expression before—whenever Kat opened herself to the emotions around her and found herself overwhelmed.

“Dammit.” He shot off the stool. When he reached Kat, he wrapped his hands around her upper arms and tried to catch her gaze. “Kat? Hey, Kat, come on. Snap out of it, okay?”

She blinked. “I lost it,” she whispered in a shaky voice. “She’s so *scared*...”

He raised a hand to her face and kept her gaze locked with his. “Yeah, I know. But it’s okay, Kat. We’ll fix it.”

She closed her eyes. As soon as she did, Alec swung her up in his arms and nodded past Jackson.

Mackenzie had come to the edge of the bar, her face tight and her fingers clenched around the edge. “Is there anything I can do? Should I call someone?”

Alec answered before Jackson could. “I don’t suppose you could find Nicole for us? Tell her Kat’s out here and she’s feeling a bit light-headed.”

Mackenzie’s gaze slid back to Jackson. “Of course. She should be in the back.”

After she hurried away, Jackson looked back to Alec and groaned. “Oh, don’t start with me. Not right now.” He moved toward a booth and shoved the table to one side, making plenty of room for Alec to place Kat on one of the dark vinyl benches.

Alec settled her and crouched next to the bench. “Kat. Hey, look at me, kiddo.”

The young woman’s eyes opened slowly. “It’s okay. I’m okay. I just wasn’t expecting—” She swallowed. “Jesus Christ, Jackson. If I was as scared as she is, I’d be hiding under my damn bed, whimpering. It’s not just that, she’s—” She shook her head and made a vague gesture, her frustration at being unable to express herself evident in her tight tone. “God. It’s like she’s dying, bit by bit. Someone ripped her up inside.”

Jackson fought the anger rising within him. If some bastard *was* after Mackenzie and he got his hands him... “I should have warned you. I’d planned on it, I just...”

He’d just been distracted.

She hissed in a sudden breath. “Jackson, please—”

Alec rose, crowding Jackson and forcing him away from the bench. “Lock it down,” he whispered fiercely. “I get that you’re pissed, but Kat can’t handle it right now.”

“I got it.” He averted his eyes and tried to focus, tried to tamp down the rage and irritation. After a moment, his emotions eased. “I’m fine.” He shot Alec a bland look. “You want to back up off of me now?”

His partner studied his face and nodded shortly. “If someone’s chasing her, we don’t want to attract any attention by going through official channels. I’ll take Kat back to the office and she can work a little of her computer mojo while you convince the girl to let us help her.”

“Thanks.” Jackson glanced toward the door to the back. “Did you sense anything?”

He’d been working with Alec long enough to know his slight hesitation wasn’t a good sign. “Can’t tell you much more than Nicole did. What I’m getting doesn’t make a lot of sense, so you might be better off trying your spell.”

“Doesn’t make sense?” Jackson echoed. “What the hell does that—”

“Hey.” Nick appeared, out of breath and disheveled, at Jackson’s elbow. “Did her empathy explode?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s what I figured. I told Mackenzie it was low blood sugar. She’s in the kitchen, making her a milkshake.”

Kat bolted upright. “Are you going to let her stay here? You can’t let her leave. Something’s *wrong*. Really, really wrong.”

Nick soothed her with a soft noise. “She’s agreed to stay upstairs in Mahalia’s old place.” She laid a hand on Jackson’s arm. “You’re going to strengthen those old wards, right?”

“First thing in the morning,” he promised, “if you can get Mackenzie out of here.”

“I have a plan, of course. I’m taking her shopping. She just doesn’t know it yet.”

Jackson tapped his chin. “Alec, can you take Kat back to the office and get started on that stuff? I’m going to see if Mackenzie would like to get out of here and grab a late lunch. Maybe, if I keep trying, she’ll see that it isn’t dangerous to let us help her.” *Maybe I can figure out just what the hell she is.* It had nothing to do with wanting to spend more time with her, nothing at all. This was a job. This was protection. This was...

“A date?” Nick demanded, poking him. “You expect her to open up about whatever’s wrong on a *date*?”

Jackson blinked at Alec. “Is that...wrong?”

Alec’s expression made it clear he’d rather walk into traffic than have to answer the question. Fortunately for him, Kat spoke, her voice firm. “No. It will work. Don’t take her somewhere too fancy, and not too far from here. She’s scared and she’s overwhelmed but she wants to trust you. She wants

to—” Kat laughed. “Let’s just stick with she wants to trust you.”

Nick choked on a groan and poked Jackson again. He rubbed his arm and glared at her. “What?”

She shrugged. “Consider that an advance.”

Mackenzie watched the blender whirl, vanilla ice cream mixing with chunks of fresh strawberries she’d pulled from the industrial-sized refrigerator. She could hear the faint murmur of voices from the front, interspersed with the occasional laugh.

Nick had lied to her. Mackenzie had seen enough lies in her life to recognize when someone was talking too fast. Whatever the reason Jackson’s assistant had collapsed, Mackenzie doubted very much it had to do with her blood sugar.

She would have bet *anything* it had something to do with her. The startled, terrified way the girl had watched her as the blood drained from her face had been indication enough there was something odd going on.

It hurt more than Mackenzie wanted to admit, thinking Nick had lied to her. It hurt even more to imagine Jackson had as well. Following her could have been a way to find out where she was staying. Offering her Mahalia’s apartment was a perfect way to keep her in one place.

Stupid. Stupid, stupid... She'd let a handsome face and a friendly smile distract her from the danger. They could be out there planning right now, while she sat and made milkshakes.

She wanted to run. She *should* have run. The minute the door closed, she should have been gone. By the time they realized she was missing she could have had her things in a cab. She should have gotten a head start.

She *should* have. But she hadn't.

Stupid.

Mackenzie opened the blender and stared blindly at its contents. It was too late to run now, even if she wanted to. And that was the real issue.

She didn't want to.

Something about Nick and Jackson made it impossible for her to believe they would actually hurt her. It was foolish and naive, especially in the face of everything she'd been through in the last month, but every time she tried to consider the possibility of one of them being in league with Marcus...

It was absurd.

Sighing, she poured the milkshake into a glass and dropped in a straw. Either way, she was too tired to run again. Another city, another job, another cheap motel... She couldn't bring herself to go through it.

The group fell silent when Mackenzie pushed through the door, the milkshake in one hand and a bottle of water in the

other. *Subtle*, she thought wryly. *No, no one was talking about me at all.* She didn't say anything about it, though, just smiled. "Here you go. One strawberry milkshake."

Jackson came over to take it, his hand brushing hers. "Thanks, Kenzie."

"No problem." A shiver danced up her spine, though she wasn't sure if it was from the touch of his hand on hers or the warm tone of his voice around the nickname he'd given her. *Oh, God. I'm so stupid.*

"She's feeling better now, but we should get her started on this." He saluted her with the milkshake and handed it to the dark-haired man who'd come in with Kat.

The young woman gave Mackenzie a shaky smile. "Thank you."

"No problem. I hope you feel better." *Whatever's really wrong with you.*

Nick patted the bar. "I'm sorry, Mackenzie, but I forgot that I already asked Joe to come in this afternoon. Is there any way you could come back for the rush tonight and help out?" She shrugged one shoulder. "Tips'll be better, at any rate."

"Sure." Mackenzie set the bottle of water on the counter. "Everything—everything's okay, right?"

Nick's answer seemed easy. "Everything's fine. Really. There's not a problem."

“Okay.” She wiped her hands on a towel and tried to look calm. “I guess I’ll just go back on upstairs. If you need me early, let me know.”

Nick nodded, and Jackson flashed her a smile. “I’ll see you later, Kenzie.”

No, you won’t. The thought depressed her, but she kept the smile on her face as she walked through the front door and started around the side of the building. By the time her foot touched the first step, she knew her face was tight and exhausted, but she didn’t care.

Something was going on. Something suspicious, something having to do with her. She wanted to trust Nick—and she wanted *desperately* to trust Jackson—but the circumstances were too odd to be ignored.

She slipped into the apartment and leaned back against the door, eyeing the cheerful room with an almost tangible longing. To stretch out on the bed, to get a full night’s sleep somewhere safe—

You don’t know it’s safe.

She finally pushed herself off the door and trudged to her bag. Her anticipation of a few days of comfort had prompted her to unpack everything, and she dropped heavily to her knees and began to slowly gather her meager belongings.

She’d take the chance and sleep for a couple hours, but as soon as the streets started to fill for the evening, she was going

to run. She'd run all night if she had to, and come dawn she'd be on her way to another city, another cheap motel, another crappy job...

Covering her face with her hands, Mackenzie gave in to exhaustion and sobbed.

Chapter Five

She's going to run, Nick. I can feel it.

His earlier words echoed in his head, haunting him as he leaned against a dumpster in the alley behind Nick's bar.

They'd screwed things up.

No, correction. *He'd* screwed things up by failing to give Kat what few specifics he knew, or even suspected, of Mackenzie's situation. She'd freaked out, and Mackenzie had realized something was wrong. But there wasn't anything he could do about it now except fix it, and that meant catching her before she had a chance to skip town.

The apartment door opened shortly after six. Mackenzie emerged, clearly dressed for concealment in that blasted sweatshirt and a baseball cap. Slung over her shoulder was the bag she'd brought with her the night before.

He watched as she closed the door, locked it and slipped the key under the planter he'd pretended to pull one from the night before. When she turned to glance back at the apartment, he caught sight of her face. With no one nearby, she hadn't bothered with her usual mask, and she looked tired and

hopeless. She reached out one hand to brush over the door and visibly steeled herself to slip down the stairs.

He didn't bother to hide himself. "Mackenzie."

She stopped on the second step from the bottom, her hand clenched around the railing. "Jackson."

She looked terrified, and he cursed silently. "I'm sorry we scared you earlier, but you don't have to leave. Whatever you think is going on..."

She stared at him as if she could see through him. When she finally met his gaze again, her eyes were weary. "Something's going on," she said quietly. "I don't know what it is, and maybe it's harmless. Maybe you're all nice people. If you are, though... Well, I still should leave. Nice people can get hurt."

"Not us," he told her confidently. "Well, it's not *likely*. Whatever you're up against, whoever's got you on the run, we can help. Let us."

Even as she shook her head, Jackson could tell Kat had been right. Mackenzie *wanted* to trust him; it was clear she was wavering. More obvious was the fact that she'd reached the limits of her endurance. As he watched, tears welled and she hastened to close her eyes.

"It's too much. He'll just keep finding me, and his guys will hurt anyone who's in the way. He's crazy, Jackson. Out of his damn mind."

His heart clenched painfully, and he took a slow, careful step closer. “*Who*, Mackenzie? Tell me who it is, and we can make him leave you alone. There isn’t—” His words cut off as a frisson of electricity shot through him.

Magic.

Someone was casting a spell, and that someone was close. He shivered again and looked around. He saw nothing, but the feeling intensified, chilling him despite the heat. “Crap.”

Her eyes flew open, and she stiffened. “What?”

A sudden thought occurred to him, and he reached out, his hands landing on her upper arms. “How far has he chased you, Kenzie? How many cities?”

“I—” She stared at him, eyes wide and frightened. “This is the fifth. I thought it was my car, so I left it behind in Memphis.”

“Dammit. They’re tracking you, all right, but it’s not anything you can avoid or stop.” He let go of her and grabbed her bag, taking her hand with his free one. “Come on. We’ve got to get out of here. They’re close.”

She froze, suspicion clear on her face. “How would you know? What’s going *on*?”

He wouldn’t get very far if he had to drag her through the French Quarter. Jackson groaned as the electric feeling raised the hair on the back of his neck. “Can we please save the

explanations for later, when the crazy guy isn't about to descend on us?"

She hesitated for a split second and then started, shivering so violently Jackson felt her hand tremble in his. "What in hell—"

He didn't get a chance to respond. Two men walked around the corner of the building, wearing near-identical expressions of satisfaction. The one on the left was tall and dark with a T-shirt that stretched tightly over hard muscles. His companion was the opposite, delicate and waiflike, with his tousled hair not even reaching the top of the other man's shoulder.

The tangible aura of magic flowed, strong and steady, from the shorter man. His brown eyes fixed on Mackenzie, and he grinned. "Damn, I'm good."

Times like this, having Alec around tended to come in handy. "Evenin', boys," Jackson said, his manner not betraying his sudden tension even as his hand tightened around Mackenzie's. "Can I help you with something?"

The two men exchanged looks, and the taller one stepped forward. "We gonna do this the hard way, Jessica?"

Mackenzie's fingers dug into his hand, but her voice stayed steady. "Stop calling me that. I already told you that I'm not Jessica Evans, whoever she is."

He started to take another step, but the short man reached out suddenly, his eyes focused on Jackson. “Watch out, Eddie. He’s a caster, and not second-rate, either.”

“Really.” The man named Eddie surveyed Jackson before switching his gaze back to Mackenzie. “So, Jess—I’m sorry. *Mackenzie*. You finally starting to believe?”

“What do you want?” Jackson kept his voice even. “Who sent you?”

Eddie’s lips curled into a slow smile. “What, she didn’t tell you? Or did she lie and make up some sob story? She’s good at it, with the big blue eyes and that pretty face.”

He could have been human, but Jackson doubted it, accompanied as he was by a spell caster of the short man’s caliber. *Shapeshifter*, he decided. “Why don’t *you* tell me. The story I got is ‘crazy stalker’, and I have to say...it’s lookin’ pretty credible at the moment.”

Jackson felt the soft whisper of power down his spine as magic began to gather in the back alley. The magic-user watched him with bright eyes and a slightly condescending smile. “She’s got something our boss needs,” he said quietly. “Something very, very precious. Irreplaceable, in fact. No one’s going to hurt her, and if she comes with us she’ll be treated like a queen. Whatever she’s told you, it’s a lie.”

Jackson edged in front of Mackenzie and muttered quickly under his breath, hoping the shield he placed would

hold after he'd moved into the fight. "Tell me what she has, and I'll get it for you. But I won't let you take her against her will."

Eddie snorted. "Not how it works, buddy. You move and she comes with us, or we move you and she still comes with us."

Mackenzie's hand brushed his shoulder. "They'll do it. They'll kill you. They killed someone in Minneapolis. Chicago, too. Maybe you should just—"

Jackson lifted his arm, speaking a single word as he did, and the magic-user flew into the side of the building, his face hitting it with a sickening crunch. Jackson addressed Mackenzie as the man slumped to the ground. "Get back. If something happens, get inside with Nick. She can protect you." He didn't take his eyes from Eddie as he spoke. "Okay, Tiny. Let's see how you fare without your caster."

The alley erupted into chaos. That was the only way to describe what happened after Jackson gently pushed her back.

Mackenzie stumbled two steps and flattened herself against the wall, her gaze focused on the short man slumped on the ground. He didn't move, hadn't since he'd flown into the wall as if tossed by a giant hand.

It made no sense. Neither did Jackson's insistence that Nick would protect her. Nick was maybe five feet tall on a

good day, and so petite Mackenzie was fairly sure she could pick her up with little effort. Huge, towering Eddie looked like he could pick *Jackson* up without breaking a sweat.

Eddie started forward, looking as if he'd had the same thought. His arms hung loosely at his sides, and a cocky grin curled his lips as he sized Jackson up. "So you got the jump on Mason. Am I supposed to be impressed?"

"Nope," Jackson said. "You're supposed to be impressed after I kick your ass." He took another step away from Mackenzie and assumed a fighting stance, bringing up his fists. "Just because I use magic doesn't mean I'm a weenie."

Mackenzie's heart froze in her chest, pure panic bubbling around it. Jackson wasn't a savior *or* a hero. Jackson was as crazy as Marcus and Eddie, with their talk of shapeshifters and magic and destiny. She'd fallen headfirst into a vast cult of lunatics who thought they were something out of a fantasy novel.

Jackson was one of them. *He was too good to be true. Figures he's crazy.*

Jackson and Eddie blocked the exit from the alley. Her only other option was to go through the bar, to slip past Nick and whoever else from their crazy cult might be inside. To abandon Jackson to trouble he'd stumbled into because of her.

Crazy or not, he'd helped her. She couldn't run away.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

It seemed like her realization had taken forever, but the men still approached each other with deadly intent. Eddie growled low in his throat as he stopped just out of reach, pure joy flooding his eyes. He didn't pause for witty repartee, didn't do any of the silly things the bad guys always did in movies. He sized up Jackson and launched himself at him, his fist flying so fast it was only a blur.

Jackson must have anticipated it. He dodged the punch, stepping aside so Eddie's blow whistled harmlessly through the air. He rounded on him, his foot aiming for the back of Eddie's knee. It looked like the blow might land, but Eddie swung the back of his fist out and clipped Jackson on the side of the head. He staggered, and Mackenzie's breath caught in her throat.

It didn't take him long to recover, and he straightened, flashing Eddie a disgruntled look. "Now, are you pullin' those at all? Because if you're fightin' dirty, I'm joinin' you."

Eddie smirked and came at him again.

"Oh, *fine*." Jackson huffed and held up a closed fist. When he opened it, a shimmering ball of light hovered above his palm.

Mackenzie blinked and rubbed her eyes, but when she looked again it hadn't disappeared. If anything, the light had grown brighter.

Oh God, now I'm going crazy.

The corner of Jackson's mouth ticked up as he regarded Eddie. "Aren't you just wishin' you knew what I was about to do?"

The cocky grin slid from Eddie's face as he charged, full-bore, at Jackson. At the last second, he whispered and the light exploded, blinding in its intensity.

When Mackenzie's vision cleared, Jackson stood beside her. "Come on. The effect only lasts for a couple of minutes. We'd better be far away from here by then."

She looked at Eddie, who stumbled into the wall and cursed, hands out in front of him as though he couldn't see.

She'd lost her mind. It was the only explanation. She'd lost her mind, and the stress and the terror had made her as insane as they were. *Or maybe it's real*, whispered a tiny voice, one she wasn't sure she could acknowledge. Not yet.

But now wasn't the time to wonder about her sanity. Jackson might be crazy, but he hadn't hurt her yet. She wrapped her hand around his and nodded. "Okay. Okay. Let's go."

Chapter Six

His apartment was in the Garden District, on the first floor of a quiet building on a quiet street. Jackson very much liked it that way, just as he was fond of the multiple exits, excellent vantage point and long-standing wards, thanks to his upstairs neighbor, sweet little Mrs. Morris. She was off her rocker, but mostly harmless, considering she also happened to be one of the most powerful witches in the city.

“Come on in,” he said to Mackenzie. It was clean, for once, so at least he wasn’t embarrassed about the state of his place. “Just...make yourself at home. You want a drink, right? I bet you want a drink.”

“I—” She looked as dazed now as she had when he’d grabbed her hand to lead her away from the bar. “Maybe I need a psychiatrist. Or a padded room. If I can’t have those, I suppose a drink will do.”

“Nah, you’re okay,” he assured her. “Well, nothing some bourbon won’t cure.” He walked over to the small cabinet in the corner, and withdrew a glass and a crystal decanter. “A little, a lot or ‘bring me the bottle, already’?”

When he turned, it was to find Mackenzie watching him with shocked blue eyes. “How many bottles do you have over there?”

Well, that answered that question. He poured a generous serving and corked the decanter. “How about we try to keep you sober for the time being? Until I can help you process what you saw.”

She stood in the middle of the room, looking too dazed to sit. “How can I process it? Everyone’s crazy, and now I am too.”

He gently directed her toward the sofa and sat in the sleek leather chair adjacent to it. “You’re not crazy. Neither am I. Whether this guy after you is nuts has yet to be determined.” He eyed her. “Go on. Ask me something.”

Mackenzie blinked once and looked at the glass he’d pressed into her hands. “Marcus said he was some sort of—of werewolf thing. Only not a wolf. A cougar or something. And he babbled on and on about magic and our destiny and how we were connected at birth. I thought he was nuts. I mean, *insane*. Escaped-from-an-institution crazy.”

“Well...” Jackson scratched the back of his neck. “The stuff about magic and destiny sounds like a bad pickup line, but I suppose he could be a cougar.” He eyed her. “That would mean he thinks you’re one too. You’re not?”

She lifted her head, staring at him as if she didn't understand what he was asking. "Do you have any idea how *crazy* you sound? You just—you just asked me if I'm—" She closed her eyes and drank half of the bourbon at once.

"A cougar, yes," he nodded, watching her carefully. She might think she was on the verge of a psychotic break, but she wasn't going into shock, which was the more immediate threat. "I can look, if you'd like. It's a simple spell. Mahalia taught it to me."

Mackenzie opened her eyes again and stared at him. "A spell," she said flatly. "Is that—is that what—God, I can't believe I'm saying this." She took another sip and exhaled. "Is that what was going on with those two guys?"

Jackson sighed and tilted his head from side to side. "Eh, sort of. The little scrawny guy was a magic-user. A spell caster," he clarified. "He was getting ready to do something big, so I had to knock him out. The wall was handy. As for the tall guy, Eddie... Well, now, that was something entirely different. I can't be sure, but I think he was a shifter."

"Shifter?" She blinked at him.

"Shapeshifter. Wolf, probably," he said with a nod. "There aren't many of any other kind, not around these parts." He paused, but figured she had to be on information overload, anyway. He might as well go for it. "Nick and Alec, my partner? They're wolves too."

She drained the rest of the bourbon and set the glass down with a *thump*. “Do...” She waved a hand. “Something magical.”

“Useful, or just showy?”

“Something I can see. Something that proves what you’re saying.”

He pondered that. “Energy is my thing. I could make you float, but you can’t see that. I can set things on fire, or throw them, or make them invisible.” He grinned. “Hey. Want to see me make myself invisible?”

“I— Okay. Okay, let me see you make yourself invisible.”

He laughed. “I never get tired of that one.” He stood and rubbed his hands together. “Okay, this isn’t so much about me being invisible as you not being able to see me. I’m going to be affecting light refraction, or some shit. Mahalia explained it all to me, but I don’t really care how it works. Here goes.” He closed his eyes and the humming started, the barely perceptible thread of sound that usually accompanied magic. “Now, look away, but just for a second. I’ll stay right here.”

Jackson watched as she closed her eyes and opened them again. She looked to the left and right and furrowed her brow. She rose to her feet and glanced behind the couch. Then she started toward him, obviously planning on looking behind the chair he’d been sitting in.

Touch negated the effects of the spell, but he didn't move. He knew what she'd see when she bumped into him—a shimmering, almost like she'd disturbed a pool of water, and he'd be there in front of her, appearing as the spell dissolved around him.

It happened a second later. She walked directly into him, smacking the top of her head against his chin. He grabbed her arms just in time to keep her from stumbling backward, and her eyes widened as she watched the spell fade. “Oh. My. God.”

She swayed as if she was going to faint, and he strengthened his grip on her arms, steadying her. “Hey. Hey now, you're the one who wanted flashy.” He bent and looked into her eyes. “Come on, Kenzie.”

“I—” She stared back at him. “I am either really, really crazy, or...” She closed her eyes. “Do your spell,” she whispered. “The one that—that will tell if Marcus was lying about me.”

He hesitated. “Are you sure?” At her nod, he took a deep breath and backed away a few steps. “Okay.”

It didn't take long, and it wasn't flashy at all. It would tingle, not in a pleasant way, but it wouldn't *hurt* as the magic coursed through her, revealing her to his sight.

He'd never seen a cougar in the flesh before, but there it was. Inside Mackenzie was a great sleeping cat, curled up and

dreaming, alight with the magic potential she had yet to unleash.

She watched him nervously, and he smiled. “She’s in there, all right, sweetheart. You’ve just got to figure out how to get her out.”

Mackenzie stared at him in abject shock. She took one shaking step back and another before collapsing onto the couch. “This is nuts. And I’m nuts to even be considering it...”

“It’s not nuts,” he told her calmly. “I know it seems that way, but you’re not crazy. This stuff is real.”

“I still feel crazy, though.” She wrapped her arms around her body and looked at him, her expression lost. “I don’t know what to do. It was bad enough when I had a crazy stalker. Now you’re telling me I have crazy stalkers with supernatural powers, and that apparently there’s nowhere I can hide.”

“That doesn’t mean we can’t make you safe,” Jackson said quickly. “They’ll be able to find you no matter where you go, yeah. But that means we need to make sure you’re protected.” He gestured to the room around them. “Here, for instance, is safe.”

“Here?” Her eyes shifted to take in his living room, as if looking for something that made this place different. Special. “Is it because you—you did some...spell?”

“Well, see, I *would* have,” He sat in his chair again. “After I moved in, I was all set to put up the strongest wards I could manage.” He gave her a smile. “Turns out, my upstairs neighbor is a witch. She placed wards years ago, and they’re more powerful than anything I could rustle up now.”

“Oh.” Her voice sounded strained. “So...your neighbor is a witch, my boss is a werewolf, you can make yourself invisible and you think I can turn into a cat.”

“Oh, I’m pretty damn sure you can tu—” His words cut off as her eyes grew impossibly wide. *Nice going, Jackson. She’s going to snap if you don’t shut up.* “Uh, listen. Why don’t you take a bath while I start dinner? A nice, long soak? How does that sound?”

“Okay,” she said faintly. “I—I could— That would be nice.”

“Okay,” he said, relieved. “It’s, uh, right through here.”

He led her down the short hallway to the bathroom, reaching to turn on the light before stepping back. “The building’s kind of old.” He gestured to the claw-footed tub. “But in a charming way. I think...” He opened the cabinet situated in an alcove and rummaged through it. “Susie had some— Yeah, here we go.” He pulled out a glass jar of bath salts and grinned. “My girlfriend left these. Well, you know, back when she *was* my girlfriend.”

She stared at him, and he mentally kicked himself. She'd been through enough without him running off at the mouth like a nervous kid on a first date. The bath salts had clumped together in a solid pink mass at the bottom of the jar, so he banged it against the cabinet door and shrugged. "Yeah. So." He placed them on a low shelf by the tub and scratched the back of his head. "Towels are in the closet and it takes a minute for the hot water to get hot..."

She remained quiet long enough to make him fidget nervously before she offered him what looked like an honest smile. "Thank you, Jackson. I appreciate it."

"Hey, don't mention it." He backed out the door. "How do you like Italian food?"

"Sounds wonderful." She was already fiddling with the taps on the tub. "I—wait. I need to call Nick. She'll be expecting me—"

"I'll handle it. I have to make a couple of calls."

"Okay. Thanks." She smiled at him again as he pulled the door shut, and he could hear the water almost at once.

Jackson cursed softly as he tried to hold the phone against his ear and fumble through the refrigerator at the same time. "Come on, Alec..."

It took four rings for Alec's familiar voice to answer. "Aren't you supposed to be having your hot date?"

"Would that I was." Jackson pulled a hunk of cheese from the crisper. "Turns out, I ran into a bit of trouble."

"Oh yeah?" Jackson could hear the sudden tension in Alec's casual question. "Found out what's going on with your new friend, I take it?"

"Someone's after her," he confirmed. "Persistent too, whoever it is. Sent a spell caster and some muscle after us, probably a shapeshifter. They tracked her magically and attacked us out behind Nick's bar. I'd appreciate it if you'd check in on her, make sure they didn't cause her any problems after we split."

"Shit." He heard a rustle of paper in the background and Kat's voice demanding to know what was going on. "Yeah, I'll swing by, see if they left a trail I can follow. The girl okay?"

"Physically, she's fine. She's just trying to process the fact that she's a shapeshifter and had no clue until half an hour ago."

There was a long pause before Alec said hesitantly, "Cougar?" He sounded almost guilty.

"Yeah." Jackson dragged a large wooden cutting board from the shelf. "Thanks for the heads-up, by the way."

“Well, Jesus, Jackson. Last time I saw a cougar was about twenty-five, maybe almost thirty years ago. I thought I was imagining it, and it didn’t make sense to send you off on the wrong track.”

In the background, Kat’s voice came clearly again. “Jackson’s girlfriend’s a *cougar*?”

Jackson decided to ignore it for the time being, but his ears heated. “The goons working for Mackenzie’s stalker said she has something priceless, something he needs, and I’m guessing they’re not talking about the Hope diamond. Cougars are rare enough that this could be nothing more than—”

“A guy who’s damn determined to have little cougar babies,” Alec finished, his voice hard. “You and I both know there are shifters out there who’ll do just about anything to keep the bloodlines pure.”

“Yeah.” Jackson figured his partner knew that better than anyone. “I guess flowers and chocolates didn’t work, so he’s taken to stalking, which doesn’t seem likely to land him a mate, but...” He let the words trail off, not wanting to voice the obvious. “One of the guys called her by another name. Jessica Evans. See what Kat can pull up on that, would you?”

“Sure. It’ll give her something to do other than listen to my damn phone conversations. You need any extra protection over there, or are you hunkering down behind the wards for the night?”

“Starting some marinara sauce as we speak.”

Alec groaned. “Oh hell, Jackson. You’re making Italian food? Is this really the best time for seduction?”

Now his face was flaming. “It’s not seduction,” he insisted, lowering his voice. “It’s a job.”

“It’s Italian food,” Alec countered in an amused voice. “You always make Italian food when you want to impress a woman.”

“Or when it’s the easiest thing to pull together on short notice.” Jackson glanced back over his shoulder to make sure Mackenzie hadn’t walked in. “Oh, why am I explaining myself to you? Shut up and go check on Nick.”

“Sure thing, Casanova. Call me if anything comes up.”

Jackson grumbled as he ended the call and began chopping tomatoes. Calling Nick wouldn’t be necessary; Alec would tell Mackenzie’s boss exactly where she was. Hell, he’d probably mention the marinara too, and they’d both have a jolly laugh at his expense.

Which was absurd. Just because she happened to be the most beautiful woman he’d seen in a while—okay, *ever*—didn’t mean he had designs on her. She was a job. He’d protect her, keep her safe and find out why in hell some lunatic had chased her through five cities. He’d resolve the situation, she’d be free to go and Jackson could get on with his life.

Except that his chest felt tight when he thought about Mackenzie going home, wherever that happened to be.

Dammit.

He should have ordered Chinese food.

It took twenty minutes of soaking in the bathtub before Mackenzie came to the conclusion that perhaps—*perhaps*—she needed to consider the possibility she might not be crazy.

It wasn't Jackson's spontaneous case of invisibility that had decided her. It wasn't even the altercation in the alley, though that had been showy in and of itself.

If she was going to be completely honest with herself, she'd have to admit she'd been wondering since the very first day. Since Marcus had knocked on her door knowing the one thing she hadn't told anyone.

"Do you have the dreams, Jessie? Do you run at night, feel the wind in your face and know you're not like them?"

She'd had the dreams all of her life, but never remembered the details upon waking. Bits and pieces, the sound of the wind, the smell of the forest, the feeling of freedom. They'd been peaceful dreams that she'd awoken from renewed, but always with a sense of longing. As if something was missing.

The minute she'd opened the door and set eyes on Marcus, she'd found that something. She recognized him even

though she'd never seen him before. He'd felt *right*, like someone who would understand her. Between that and his charming smile, she'd let him into her home and listened to his insane ranting for far longer than she should have.

He'd left eventually, and that night she'd dreamt again. Only that time she'd remembered every detail, every scent, every sound. She didn't forget running across an open field, feeling the grass beneath her feet.

Beneath her *paws*.

She'd blamed it on stress and the crazy things Marcus had said, ignoring the fact that the dreams made her ache with longing, and that waking was like being thrust back into a world where she didn't quite fit.

The world had always been like that, until Marcus. Until Nick.

Until Jackson.

He was different. Not in the same way as Marcus, not in a familiar way, but different nonetheless. As if maybe he didn't quite fit, either.

But he fit with Nick and Alec and Kat, who, for all Mackenzie knew, was another werewolf, or a witch, or God knew what. He fit with them, and for the first time in her life she'd found people she might be able to belong with.

Yesterday it hadn't made any sense to her. But today... Today she wondered if maybe the reason she fit was because she, too, was something other than human.

She soaked in the tub until the water cooled, struggling to accept the possibility there might very well be a world beyond the one she knew. Giving Jackson the benefit of the doubt was the only choice she had.

Besides which, my sole alternative involves checking myself into a nuthouse.

Mackenzie rose from the tub and wrapped herself in a thick towel she'd pulled out of the small wooden closet. Checking herself into an institution might be the most logical choice, but she hoped to save it as a backup plan.

Having decided to go forth as if she believed all of the outrageous things she'd heard and seen today, she felt a good bit steadier as she pulled her clothes back on. By the time she'd run a comb through her hair and hung up the towels, she thought she might even be ready to try some basic conversation.

The smell of tomato sauce and red wine greeted her when she opened the bathroom door. She wandered down the hallway and past a tiny office before spotting Jackson in the small kitchen.

He must have sensed her there, because he raised his head from peeking in the oven and smiled. "It'll be ready soon. Want to start with some wine and a salad?"

"Sure." She glanced around, feeling out of place. "Can I help you with anything?"

"Nah, everything's mostly done. Have a seat." He gestured toward the round oak table in the breakfast nook. "I figured we could eat in here instead of in the dining room."

It was cozy, and right now that was what she wanted more than anything. Comfortable, normal things. She slipped past him and pulled out one of the chairs. "It smells wonderful. It's been a while since I had a home-cooked meal."

He brought over a couple of wine goblets and started to fill them. "That's a shame."

She glanced at him. "The guy? Marcus? He tried to snatch me on July fifth. I got away two days later, and I've been running since."

"You've been on the road for over a month?" he asked incredulously.

"I guess, yeah. Seems longer. Seems like forever."

He put the wine on the table and gave her a serious look. "Alec and Kat have already started looking into this. Do you happen to remember Marcus's last name?"

She only wished she'd been able to forget it. Everything about that first encounter was burned into her memory. "Foster. He said his name was Marcus Foster."

Jackson stopped and flashed her another of those easy smiles that made her heart skip a beat. "By the time we finish our salads, the chicken should be ready." He pulled a large wooden bowl out of the refrigerator and dished salad onto the small plates already on the table.

They ate in relative silence, until he finally looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "So, what did you do before you hit the road? For a living, I mean?"

"Actually, I was a bartender. Not that I planned on that being my long-term career or anything. It's just pretty hard to pay the bills as a dancer if you're not interested in taking your clothes off." She'd done it in Chicago, though, working in a strip club when she couldn't find another job.

"You'll like working for Nick. She's pretty down-to-earth, all things considered."

Mackenzie took a sip of her wine and eyed him over the rim of the glass. "Who wouldn't like working there? The place is always full of handsome, charming men."

"Just remember that handsome, charming men are usually trouble with a capital T." A quick wink accompanied his next words. "I just happen to be the exception that proves that particular rule."

She smiled at him again before she could stop herself, realizing too late that it didn't feel fake. She was giving him the smile she gave men she was interested in. *Great. I'm a freakish shapeshifting cat and I'm flirting with a guy who can make himself invisible.*

Maybe she was crazy *and* stupid. Or maybe the sheer *normalcy* of flirting with a handsome man was exactly what she needed.

So she lifted her glass to him and refused to feel guilty about how pleased she felt when he quickly glanced away. Witches and shapeshifters and invisibility were far beyond her realm of experience, but men she understood.

He cleared his throat and raised his glass, as well. "To exceptions," he murmured.

Mackenzie felt a lot more relaxed by the time dinner was over, having enjoyed an excellent meal in Jackson's charming company. She insisted on helping him clean, finding the boring task of clearing the table and rinsing dishes oddly soothing. By the time she followed him into the living room, she'd almost managed to forget that he'd turned her entire understanding of the world upside down over the course of an evening.

He handed her a cup of coffee and gestured to the sofa. “Sit. I’ll turn on some music. Or would you prefer the television?”

“Oh, music.” She sank into the cushions of the couch before setting the mug carefully on the side table. “That might be what I miss the most of everything I had to leave behind—my music collection.”

He crossed to the intricate, heavy shelves that served as an entertainment center. “What do you like to listen to?”

“I’m not too picky. I just miss music in general.”

Smoky jazz filled the room, and he gave her a sheepish smile. “Mahalia’s fault.” He walked back to his leather chair. “I was strictly classic rock before she got her mitts on me and opened my eyes to the wonder that is a torch song done right.”

Mackenzie closed her eyes as the music washed over her. “It’s gorgeous. It’s perfect.”

“Maybe you’ll meet Mahalia one day, and you can thank her for saving you from having to listen to Led Zeppelin.” He fell silent.

They sat there for a while, sipping their coffee, and he turned a quizzical gaze on her. “You’re...what? Twenty-two? Twenty-three? How come you don’t know about the cougar thing? Haven’t you shifted before?”

She’d been wondering the same thing. “It seems like the kind of thing I should know, doesn’t it? But no, I think I’d

remember if I turned into a gigantic cat. The only thing I ever had was—” She hesitated, looking at her hands.

The dreams had always been her secret, but the time for secrets was past. If she was going to deal with this new world she found herself in, she would have to start talking about it.

She looked at Jackson. “Dreams. I’ve always had them, but I never really remembered more than bits and pieces in the morning. After I met Marcus, I started having them almost every night. I remember them now.”

He looked pensive. “Are you interested in learning more about it? Maybe we can find someone. I mean, I know lots of wolves, but cougars are so rare.”

“Really?” If it was true—if *any* of it was true—it might explain why Marcus seemed so determined to have her. “But... Well, *why*? I mean, why is it so rare?”

Jackson shrugged a shoulder. “Wolves are the only breed that can transform others. I don’t know why; I’m not sure if anyone does. But all the old legends about werewolf bites and lycanthropy... They have a grain of truth to them.” He finished his coffee and set the mug down. “Nick and Alec were both born wolves. They come from old families. But Derek Gabriel—I think you met him at the bar—was turned by an attack several years ago.”

“The one Nick has a crush on?”

He snorted. “Don’t let her hear you say that, or you might be looking for a new job. She’s had it bad for him since he started coming to the bar, and that was way back when Mahalia still owned it.” Jackson shook his head. “Too bad.”

“He seems nice enough,” Mackenzie protested. “I mean, a bit of a flirt, but that can be charming sometimes too.” She raised one eyebrow at him. “Or are you going to try and tell me *you’re* not the kind of guy who likes to flirt?”

“Hey, now. I like to flirt as much as, but no more than, the next guy. But I wasn’t kidding when I said the wolves were all over the place.” He seemed to be choosing his words carefully. “There are so many of them that they have their own society, complete with a complex political structure...and prejudices. Nick’s father is the top dog, the leader of them all. The Alpha. That’s why it’s too bad about her unfortunate crush.”

She studied his face, trying to understand his meaning. “Nick said her father didn’t like her owning a bar in New Orleans. She didn’t seem too upset about it. Being with Derek would be worse than that?”

He looked vaguely ill. “Derek’s a second-class citizen, Mackenzie.” At her shocked breath, he shrugged again. “Welcome to the realities of supernatural society. Sucks just as bad as the world you’re used to, unfortunately.” He paused. “Not that Nick cares. She’s not like that. Most of the shifters

in the city are here because they refuse to be part of that society.”

“God, that’s terrible.” She shivered and drew her legs up to wrap her arms around them. “But you said there aren’t as many cougars. Do you think—?” She stopped, not sure if she wanted an answer to her question. “Is that why Marcus won’t leave me alone?”

“Could be. Did he say anything about wanting you to have lots of his babies?”

Mackenzie couldn’t help the flush that colored her cheeks. “He said—God, it’s so pathetic I can’t believe I’m repeating it.” She took a deep breath and made a face. “He said we were destined to be the parents of the most important children history might ever see.”

Jackson choked. “That seems a bit...enthusiastically ambitious.”

“I’ve been tending bar for four years. I’ve had my share of guys hit on me. But he reminded me of a religious fanatic or something. Like God had sent him forth to marry me and father children on me. It was creepy even before he tried to snatch me off the street.”

Jackson’s fingers tightened on the arm of the chair, digging into the supple brown leather. “He’s not going to get you, Mackenzie. Alec and I are good. We’ll stop him.”

“Okay,” she said, more to reassure him than anything else. They sat in silence as the jazz floated through the room. Jackson hadn’t mentioned taking her somewhere else for the night, but their easy flirtation during dinner hadn’t been serious enough to make her think he expected her to spend the night with him.

Too bad.

The thought startled her, though it probably shouldn’t have. She’d been almost painfully attracted to Jackson since she’d laid eyes on him, and that attraction hadn’t wavered, even in the face of everything they’d been through in the past twenty-four hours. If anything, it had just grown stronger.

And here they were, alone in his apartment with soft jazz playing and a couple of glasses of wine singing through her veins, and she wanted more than anything to touch him. To slide her hands over his face, to touch his hair and tangle her fingers in it. She wanted to see the strong muscles she’d felt through his clothing when he’d pulled her back in the alleyway, to run her hands along his skin and feel his mouth on hers.

She just *wanted*, and she couldn’t keep that desire from her face, from her eyes. She saw the truth of it when he looked at her, heard it in the way his breathing hitched as he watched her study him. He could see it, could tell everything she wanted to do.

He shifted in his chair. “It’s getting late,” he said, his voice a low rasp. “Whenever you’re ready, I can pull the couch out. It’s not the most comfortable bed in the world, but it’ll do in a pinch.”

It was impossible to tear her eyes away from his. “Don’t worry about it,” she heard herself say in a soft, husky whisper. “I can sleep on it like this. Find me a pillow and a blanket, and it’ll be more comfortable than most of the places I’ve slept lately.”

He looked away and headed for the hallway. “It’s not a bother. I’ll just get everything ready while you’re brushing your teeth. No problem.”

Mackenzie rose quietly, picked up her bag and slipped past him into the bathroom.

By the time she returned, he’d pulled out the bed and was busily tucking a sheet around the fold-out mattress. She moved to help him, and he shook his head. “No, it’s okay. I’ve got it.” Her shoulder brushed his bare arm, and he hissed in a sharp breath.

She felt her own breathing roughen at the hot look in his eyes. If she’d had any doubts about whether he wanted her, they were swept away under the intensity of that gaze.

Her hand rose, seemingly of its own volition, and she stopped it just before her fingers brushed his skin. “Jackson—”

He leaned closer, his head bending toward hers, and she licked her lips, anticipating the kiss. Jackson froze, cleared his throat and backed away, retrieving a pillow from the leather chair. “Here. If you need another blanket, there are some in the closet in the hall. Sleep well.”

Then he turned and walked out of the room.

She clutched the pillow to her chest, her heart beating far too quickly. The realization that he’d executed a chivalrous retreat brought a hint of a blush to her cheeks as she slid onto the bed and curled under the thin blanket.

Mackenzie dreamt of wide open fields and running wildly downhill, with the wind in her face and the smell of the forest surrounding her. But when she reached the bottom of the hill and tumbled onto the grass, she wasn’t a cougar. Jackson rolled her over, crushing the flowers beneath them as his lips lowered to hers...

Even in her sleep, she smiled.

Chapter Seven

Jackson dodged a couple of early-morning joggers and cut across the street, deep in thought. He'd hated dropping Mackenzie off at Nick's place, especially when he knew Nick would probably sleep for several more hours, but he hadn't had a choice. He couldn't leave her by herself, and Nick's renovated side-hall Victorian cottage in the French Quarter was the only place with wards every bit as impressive as the ones at his own apartment. Besides, his only other alternative would have involved bringing her to the office with him, and he wasn't sure it was a good idea for the two of them to be together anywhere near Kat. His assistant would pick up on the sexual tension between them in a heartbeat.

He wasn't sure he'd call himself a ladies' man, but he hadn't gone lonely, that much was certain. He hadn't imagined the longing looks Mackenzie had been giving him the night before, or the way her gaze heated when it lingered on him. No, there was something there, all right, an undercurrent of desire that would be next to impossible to hide from anyone with a half-decent pair of eyes, much less an empath.

And he wasn't *quite* ready for his coworkers to make his life a living hell.

Still, he couldn't help thinking about the warmth of Mackenzie's skin when it had touched his the night before. He'd felt the spark, even through the cheap material of her pajama top, and he groaned silently as he approached the office. If he didn't bring his thoughts under control, Kat wouldn't need to see him with Mackenzie to know he'd spent the entire night dreaming of her.

With one last deep breath, he pushed open the door. "Morning. What have we learned?"

Alec retrieved a file from his desk and held it out. "Kat was up most of the night working her computer mojo, so I gave her the morning off. It's all in here, but the short version is that there was a Jessica Evans from South Dakota who died in a house fire with her parents in 1988. She would have been five years old at the time."

Jackson glanced through the file. "Anything about the parents or the fire ping as suspicious?"

"Not if you're looking at the normal sources." Alec rocked his chair back and forth. "But I made some calls, too. I have a friend in that area. Remember how I said I met a cougar one time?"

Jackson arched an eyebrow. "One of the parents?"

“The father,” Alec confirmed. “Simon Evans. My friend told me his full name last night. Apparently, Simon told everyone that he had a job opportunity in the early eighties and disappeared completely. No one heard a peep from or about him or his wife until the fire a few years later.”

“It’s too much of a coincidence for it not to be Mackenzie’s family,” he mused absently. “The question becomes, I guess, who actually died in the fire, if anyone? Or, if it was staged, why?”

Alec shrugged one shoulder. “Can’t help you there. I don’t remember much about the guy. We bumped into him at a bar and played pool for a half hour or so. I was so impressed by the fact that I was seeing a real, live cougar that I hardly paid attention to a damn thing he said.”

Jackson shook his head. “It’s probably not important.” He threw the file on his desk and walked to the coffee maker, starting a fresh pot with distracted, automatic movements. “The guy gave her his name, probably his real one. I’m going to see what I can run down about it today. I might also call Mahalia and ask if she can put me in contact with her friend, Steven, or another cougar. Kenzie’s bound to have questions that you and Nick can’t answer.”

He realized his mistake when both of Alec’s eyebrows flew up. “*Kenzie’s* going to have questions, is she?” he said dryly. “Guess the Italian food worked.”

Jackson cleared his throat and focused on the coffee maker. Insisting nothing had happened would only amuse Alec further, so he shrugged and ignored his own slip of the tongue. “Wouldn’t you have questions?”

“I’ve got one. If she’s Jessica Evans, that’d make her twenty-five. The odds of her hitting twenty-five without shifting are probably about a few thousand to one. The only time I’ve ever heard of it is in cases where someone’s taken steps to prevent it. But that’s some damn powerful magic.”

Jackson turned and nodded. “I asked her last night, but she doesn’t have a clue. I figured I could add it to the list of things to check with Mahalia about when I call her this morning.” He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the floor as the aroma of coffee filled the office. “I’ve got that feeling, Alec. The one I get sometimes right before things go to hell.”

His partner studied him. “If Mahalia doesn’t know about the shifting thing, you should ask Nick to call her sister. Michelle can cast a spell that keeps a wolf from shifting. Their father uses it during trials to keep things *civilized*.”

The disgusted emphasis Alec placed on the last word spoke volumes about how he felt about the way John Wesley Peyton ran the board. “I’ll keep that in mind, but I’m not sure if that’s what we’re looking at here. I mean, Jesus, that kind of

spell? Duration like this would be all but impossible for anyone but the most powerful of casters.”

“You shouldn’t underestimate Michelle. There’s a reason people like her end up executed by their packs more often than not. The Seers are too damn powerful, and that much power makes them unstable. I like Nick and all, but her sister scares the shit out of me sometimes.”

“Just be glad she lives in New York and we’ve got the uncomplicated twin.”

“Yeah.” Alec snorted, poured himself a mug of coffee and leaned against the counter. “We’re all having fun teasing you about the girl, but this situation could be serious. Are you going to be able to concentrate if the shit hits the fan?”

“I can get it done.” He grimaced at his partner. “Dammit, Alec. For your information, nothing happened.”

“I’d be a lot less worried if something had. If it were just sex, you could get it out of your system.”

Jackson blew out an exasperated breath. “I don’t make a habit of seducing women who’re on the run from supernatural stalkers. That’s a little complicated for my tastes.” He grabbed the phone on his desk. “You’ve got a dirty mind.”

“Never said I didn’t. So you gonna fix the wards on Mahalia’s old place?”

“No real reason to.” Jackson avoided meeting Alec’s eyes as he dialed Mahalia’s number. “It’d probably be safer for her

to stay with me for the time being. Since the guy's goons already tracked her to the bar, I mean."

"Mmm. I'm sure that'll do wonders for your concentration."

"I said I could get it done."

"Uh-huh." Alec watched him. "If you don't have anything else for me right now, I'm going to go annoy Nick by lurking around and keeping an eye on them."

Jackson waved a hand at him as the line started ringing. "Go. If I need you, I'll call."

It had been over a month since Mackenzie had gotten the chance to do something as wonderfully lazy as lounge on a couch and watch television. Of course, only half of her attention was *on* the television. For someone on the run from an evil gang of supernatural stalkers, she had spent an absurd amount of the morning daydreaming about the illicit things she wanted to do to Jackson.

It wasn't a productive use of her time. *And I don't care.*

She heard Nick before she saw her, the soft sound of footsteps on the stairs reaching her ears over the quiet hum of the television. Mackenzie reached for the remote control and cut off the music video channel as Nick appeared in the doorway. "Hey, Nick. Sorry we woke you so early."

“Eh, it’s okay.” Her tousled hair fell around her shoulders, and she covered a yawn as she dropped to the couch and arranged her worn terrycloth robe over her legs. “Alec told me Jackson would probably drop you off here before work. Good thing, too. We’ve got some major shopping to do before the afternoon rush.”

Mackenzie blinked at her, hoping she didn’t look as confused as she felt. “Shopping...for the bar?”

Nick grinned and stretched. “Nah. Girl shopping. It’s the best way to dish gossip, and I’m willing to bet you’ve got some after last night.”

She wasn’t the type of woman who usually blushed, but the teasing look in Nick’s eyes made her cheeks heat. “Jackson told me that Alec...told you what happened yesterday,” she said as a way of changing the subject. “How much did he tell you?”

“What, about what happened outside the bar?” Nick made a face. “Just that some whack job is after you, and sent a caster and a big, strapping shifter to fetch you.” She rolled her large brown eyes. “Then he said Jackson took you back to his place and seduced you. But I *told* Alec that Jackson making Italian food doesn’t mean he tried to climb in your pants.” She paused, taking in Mackenzie’s blush. “Or *did* he?”

“No.” *Damn it.* “But he did tell me that you—that you’re a—” It was impossible to get the words out, even if Nick *had*

mentioned “shifters” and “casters” as if they were a completely natural thing to talk about.

“Shapeshifter?” Nick supplied, nodding. “Mm-hmm.”

It sounded insane. “I’m not sure what to think about all of this, honestly. I thought Jackson was insane, but he *made himself invisible* and that means he’s telling the truth or *I’m* insane...”

Nick giggled and clapped her hands together. “Bastard. He’s a show-off, I don’t care what he says.” She gave Mackenzie a reassuring smile. “Neither of you is insane. It must *seem* crazy, and honestly? I can’t even sympathize. I was born into this life. I can’t imagine what it must be like to just find out one day.” She propped her arm on the back of the sofa and rested her head on her hand. “Do you have any questions about stuff? I can try to answer them.”

There were so many Mackenzie hardly knew where to start. She hesitated, gathering her courage, and plowed forward. “Can I see—I mean, can you—” She waved her hand vaguely.

Nick raised an eyebrow. “You sure you want to?”

“No, I’m not. But it might make me stop questioning my sanity.” *Or push me over the edge into outright lunacy.*

The other woman looked as though she was completely aware of the second possibility. “Maybe we should wait awhile. I mean, if you can take things on faith for a bit. Maybe

long enough to have brunch and hit the mall over on Canal Place?”

Mackenzie wasn't sure if she was disappointed or relieved, so she turned her attention to the second problem. “I can't afford to go shopping. I didn't have much in the way of savings to begin with, but I've gone through most of it in the last month.”

Nick didn't look concerned as she crawled off the couch. “I have lots of money.” She headed for the stairs with a look back over her shoulder. “Consider it compensation for keeping me company...and dishing the gossip, of course.”

Mackenzie quickly found that her tiny boss's enthusiasm for shopping was unmatched. Canal Place had been a bit of a disaster, since one look at the pricey designer boutiques had practically made Mackenzie's eyes pop out of her head, but Nick had recovered admirably and suggested they head for Magazine Street instead. The shops there turned out to be far more eclectic and far *less* highbrow, which went a long way toward putting Mackenzie more at ease.

They were sitting on a bench in the early afternoon sunlight, enjoying ice cream cones, when Nick turned to her with a quizzical look. “So, what else did Jackson tell you about me?”

She didn't want to admit she'd been talking about Nick's crush on Derek. "He said your father is some...big important leader."

Nick lowered her voice. "He's the head of the Northeast Council, and he presides over the other council leaders. He's a big shot." She kicked her feet and looked around. "He's good at all that political stuff, though. Me? Not so much. Which is why I am perfectly content to run my bar and stay out of all that society crap."

Mackenzie nodded. "Jackson said that his partner and Derek were like you. Is Kat a—a shifter too?"

"No, Kat is psychic. An empath," she clarified. "That's why she freaked out when she saw you at the bar yesterday. She was feeling what you've been feeling."

"Oh." That brought the color back to her cheeks as she imagined the things the girl would have picked up about Jackson. "Oh, my. I imagine that can be...uncomfortable."

"Mmm," Nick agreed with a smile. "Don't worry. Kat's not as big a gossip as I am. She'll keep your secrets...for the most part." Nick tossed her dripping ice cream cone in the garbage receptacle by the bench and stretched. "Ready to get to work?"

Mackenzie nodded and rose, mulling over what Nick had said. Shapeshifters, spell casters, and now psychics. If Kat really had been feeling her emotions the day before, she

wasn't surprised the girl had collapsed. Sometimes she thought the only things keeping her going were fear and adrenaline, but she'd been terrified for so long she had almost forgotten it was possible to feel anything else.

Of course, that hadn't been a problem since Jackson had appeared in her life. She'd been feeling plenty of things that had nothing to do with fear and self-preservation. If anything, her unhealthy obsession was going to put her in *more* danger, not less.

The most dangerous thing of all was the fact that, in spite of everything, she couldn't help but think he might be worth it.

The afternoon rush hit with a vengeance, and Mahalia's filled with regulars and tourists alike. Nick and Mackenzie didn't get a chance to slow down until nearly five o'clock, when only a handful of customers remained as most people headed to dinner. Nick waved Mackenzie out from behind the bar with strict instructions for her to take a break before she collapsed.

She'd barely managed to get her apron off when Alec appeared at her side. "C'mon. I got some food for us at a table in the back. Jackson's on his way."

Mackenzie followed him. Alec had appeared at their sides on the walk back to the bar that afternoon, flashing Nick an

amused grin. Several minutes of heated conversation revealed that Alec had spent the afternoon following them from store to store, a fact of which Nick had apparently been fully aware, despite giving no such indication to Mackenzie. She'd expressed her displeasure at being babysat with vigor, and it had taken most of the trip back for her to run through the list of reasons it had been unnecessary. Alec simply listened impassively, his lack of concern annoying Nick even more.

As handsome as Alec was, Mackenzie found him unsettling. He seemed perfectly content to sit in silence for long periods of time, but there was something in his eyes that made her think he noticed and analyzed everything that happened around him.

He was just as silent now as he'd been all afternoon. After a few futile attempts at conversation that mostly resulted in monosyllabic replies, Mackenzie mentally shrugged and concentrated on the sandwich he'd brought for her.

She'd almost finished eating when Alec's eyes focused on the door behind her. She stiffened, but heard Jackson's familiar voice say, "Well, at least Nick didn't kill you, Alec." He slid into the booth next to Mackenzie. "Did she threaten him with dismemberment?"

His smile made her stomach do flip-flops. "A couple of times, if I counted right."

“Good.” Jackson snatched a pickle spear from her plate. “He deserves it. Alec is a certified chauvinist. A total pig.” His gaze drifted over to the bar, where Nick spoke animatedly with two tourists who were thumbing through a handful of brochures for ghost tours. He chuckled and thumped the table, drawing Alec’s attention to the sight. “Hey. What do you want to bet she’s doing it again?”

Alec glanced at Nick and snorted. “If only the people who went on Henry’s ghost tours realized that they were seeing something more impressive than ghosts.”

Nick came over with two beers, one of which she placed in front of Jackson. “What?”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “You were sending people on Henry’s tour again.”

“And why not?” Nick asked indignantly. “So he uses some magic, fakes a couple of ghosts. Big deal. It’s not *his* fault the real haunts are so damn few and far between.” She dropped the other pilsner glass in front of Alec with a *thud* and poked him expectantly, so he heaved a long-suffering sigh and slid over. Nick sat and held up two fingers. “People who come to New Orleans looking for supernatural crap want two things: vampires and ghosts.”

Mackenzie looked from Nick to Jackson and back again. “So? If this place is crawling with shapeshifters and witches and psychics, why’s it so hard to find ghosts and vampires?”

Jackson sipped his beer. “Vampires are easy. They don’t exist. Ghosts are... Well, let’s just say they’re a matter of some debate.”

“No vampires?” She raised her eyebrows and laughed. “And this guy uses magic to fake ghosts so people will go on his tours?” The sheer absurdity of it made her suddenly certain that they were telling the truth. *No crazy person worth a damn would dream up a delusional supernatural version of New Orleans and leave out the vampires.*

Jackson grinned at her shocked amusement. “Did you spend your morning ordering straitjackets in bulk?”

“I thought about it. Nick wouldn’t let me, though.”

“Too confining.” Nick cast a knowing look at Jackson. “Did you call Mahalia?”

“I did. Had to leave a voicemail, though. She’s probably out playing shuffleboard or something.”

“God help you if she ever finds out you say stuff like that about her. That woman will *end* you.”

Their easy banter was surprisingly relaxing, and Mackenzie found herself leaning back against the padded booth as she glanced over at Jackson again. “Didn’t you say Mahalia was the one who taught you that...” She waved a hand. “That invisible thing?”

“She taught me damn near everything I know, actually.” He shifted his beer glass from one hand to the other. “Then she retired to Florida and left me high and dry.”

Nick rolled her eyes and elbowed Alec. “Should we order a violin to accompany his whining?” Jackson moved and she yelped, reaching under the table to rub her leg. “That hurt.”

“Serves you right.” He turned back to Mackenzie. “Mahalia decided to retire, in more ways than one. She sold her bar to this reprobate here, and dropped out of the magic scene completely.”

“There’s a scene?” she asked, wondering why she was surprised. “Are there meetings or clubs or something?”

“It’s not that organized, really, but people tend to be aware of each other. It pays to know who can do what, and whether they’d ever want to do it to you.”

The teasing look in his eyes made more than her face warm. She reached for her soda and tried to seem casual. “I bet it does, at that.”

Nick elbowed Alec again. “Make them stop.”

“Nothing stops Casanova,” Alec replied darkly, nudging Nick out of the booth so he could stand. “I’ve got to go get Kat. Have fun with the young and the restless, here.”

Any self-consciousness Mackenzie might have felt seemed insignificant when compared to her sharp interest in

Jackson. She didn't take her eyes off him as she smiled slowly. "I think that might have been a hint of some sort."

"Oh *God*." Nick groaned. "Jackson, it's officially slowed down enough now for me to feel comfortable telling you to get her out of here."

Mackenzie opened her mouth to agree but snapped it shut again. *Jesus, what is wrong with me?* Jackson was plenty attractive, but she was acting like a teenager in the throes of her first hormonal crush. She wasn't the type of woman to get stupid over pretty eyes and a handsome face.

Until now. The thought was disturbing enough for her to make an effort to lock down the restless desire before turning to look at Nick. "Hey, I was just kidding around. I'm here to work."

Nick shook her head. "Go. Have fun. Perry and I can handle it, or I'll call Allison to help." She headed behind the bar without waiting for another protest.

Jackson muttered under his breath, "Hey, look. My evil plan worked."

She tried to give him a quelling look, but she had the feeling it ended up more flirtatious than anything else. "I'm a responsible person. I don't skip out on work to flirt with cute guys."

“Nick’ll get over it.” He eyed the abandoned tour brochures on the bar. “Want to go on Henry’s tour? I think he has one that leaves right around dusk.”

There were a hundred things she needed to do that were more important. Maybe a thousand. She tried to concentrate on those things, but the restlessness rose in her again. The idea of spending the evening trapped in a bar—or inside any building, for that matter—was unbearable.

The restlessness wasn’t the only thing she couldn’t suppress. She found herself shifting closer, letting her leg brush against Jackson’s. “Does he really use magic?”

“Sure does.” The corner of Jackson’s mouth quirked up in a smile. “Nothing too flashy. Just a little ooga booga here and there to keep the customers happy.”

“Sounds fun.” She leaned closer and lowered her voice. “Will you tell me when he’s doing it?”

His brows drew together, but he only nodded. “Sure. Want to head out? We’ll have to hoof it over to Bourbon for the tour.”

Stop it, damn it. Stop with the flirting. The stress was obviously getting to her, and she needed a release. Maybe walking would burn off some of her extra energy. “Let’s go.”

Jackson took another bite of his frozen lemonade. “So, what did you think?”

Mackenzie laughed and poked at her lemonade with a plastic spoon. “Henry seems fun. He’s a great performer.”

“Yeah, he’s pretty good.” He put a hand on her shoulder to guide her past a group of college kids. She seemed fairly relaxed at the moment, something for which he was grateful. All evening, she’d been wavering between tranquil and intense, almost uneasy, and it was starting to worry him. “Anything else you want to see, or do you want to go back to my place and watch some television?”

“Hmm.” She seemed to consider it as she dropped her gaze to her cup again, and her shoulder tensed slightly under his hand. Her next step was too close, and she bumped into him. “Sorry. I think television would be good. I’m tired.”

“You all right?” he asked, concerned. “You seem a little off.”

“I’m not sure. I’ve been feeling...antsy. Maybe I’m not used to this much sleep.”

His frown deepened, and he threw the rest of his melting lemonade in a nearby garbage can. “Come on. We won’t wait for the streetcar. We’ll take a cab.” He laid a hand on her elbow and stepped to the curb, raising an arm to signal a taxi.

It was impossible not to hear the way her breathing hitched as his fingers brushed her skin. She shivered and

dropped her cup in the can after his. “A taxi might be a good idea.”

When a yellow cab slowed to a stop beside them, Jackson opened the door for Mackenzie. “Hop in, and we’ll get you home as fast as we can.”

She was fidgeting when he slid in next to her, one leg bouncing restlessly as she drummed her fingers on her knee. “Maybe I had too much caffeine.” The light tone sounded false, and he could *feel* her vibrating with barely leashed energy next to him.

“Maybe.” He found himself wishing Mahalia would call him back. He had the vague, uncomfortable sense that whatever was going on with Mackenzie wasn’t as mundane as a coffee overdose. He gave the cabbie his address and scooted farther from her, moving his leg away from hers. “It won’t be long.”

“Okay.” She let her head fall back as she closed her eyes. After several deep breaths, her body began to relax. “God, I don’t know. Maybe it’s just stress. There’s been so much going on...”

“Don’t sweat it. Stress can do some crazy things.”

“I suppose.” She kept her eyes closed, but her hand snuck across the seat until it found his. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“You’re welcome, Kenzie.”

They reached his apartment quickly, and Jackson paid the driver while Mackenzie stood by the cab, still looking like she was going to jump out of her skin.

“Come on.” He led her down the sidewalk. “You probably got overheated. We’ll get you a big glass of water and—” His words cut off as he touched his door, his hand flattening against the wood with a slap.

Something is wrong. Terribly wrong.

He cast a quick look around and shoved his cell phone into Mackenzie’s hand. “Here,” he said quietly. “Speed dial number two and tell Alec to get his ass here five minutes ago.”

She flipped open the phone.

Jackson only vaguely heard her speaking as he opened the door and walked in, surveying his living room. It looked the same as it had when they’d left that morning. He closed his eyes and focused, slowly turning toward the sofa. Mackenzie’s bag lay at one end, right where she’d left it, but Jackson could feel that it had been searched, rifled through. Violated.

Mackenzie stepped up behind him and laid a hand on his arm. “Alec says he’s on his way.” Her fingers trembled where they rested on his arm, the nervous energy back and worse than before.

“Check your bag.” His gaze darted around the room. “See if anything is missing.”

She frowned in confusion, but obediently opened her bag. Her frown deepened as she sorted through her belongings. “A shirt’s missing.” She glanced up. “One of the ones I sleep in. Who would steal a tank top when there’s a few hundred dollars in cash sitting right next to it?”

“Someone who isn’t after money.” He walked into the hallway and pulled his lockbox off the top shelf of his closet. He opened it quickly, removed the Beretta he kept there and performed a cursory check of its mechanisms.

“What’s going on?” Mackenzie’s voice was frightened.

He gave her a serious look. He didn’t want to scare her even more, but she deserved to know the truth about her own situation. “Whoever broke in is powerful. *Insanely* powerful. And that means that Marcus Foster has some terrifying connections.”

Chapter Eight

Jackson paced the office. “I’m telling you. It’s like the wards weren’t even *there*, Alec.”

“Mahalia hasn’t called you back yet?” Alec asked, his voice tense.

“Not a peep, but I’ll drive to Boca if I have to, because this shit isn’t funny.” He chewed on his thumbnail. “Dealing with someone who can walk right through Mrs. Morris’s most powerful magic isn’t the least bit amusing.”

Mackenzie shifted restlessly in Kat’s chair, her right foot still tapping on the floor. “Do you think it’s Marcus? Or that guy from earlier?”

Jackson stopped and looked at her, again torn between wanting to make her feel better and needing her to understand how much danger she was in. “Neither. That guy in the alley was small potatoes, and unless you neglected to mention that Foster is a wizard who’s about a hundred and fifty years old, there’s no way he could do something like this.”

Alec’s voice broke in. “He wouldn’t have to be a hundred and fifty if he was a Seer.”

Jackson fought a chill and pointed a finger at Alec. “That’s crazy talk, Jacobson. There’s *one* Seer out of how many thousands of wolves? The one cougar Seer I know of—” He broke off and glanced at Mackenzie. “Was the guy trying to romance you in his seventies?”

For the first time since their arrival she stopped fidgeting. “Uh, no. No, he looked my age, maybe a little older. Couldn’t have been much past thirty.”

Alec looked undaunted. “Well maybe there’s another one.”

“What are the mathematical odds of that, Alec?”

“Hell, Jackson. Who even knows? Who knows how many wolf Seers disappear every year because someone found out their precious blood had magic in it? Do you think Nick’s sister would have made it to adulthood if their dad wasn’t the Alpha? Besides, no one knows for sure how many cougars are out there. It’s not impossible.”

Before Jackson could reply, Mackenzie spoke. “I don’t understand. What’s a Seer? A psychic?”

Jackson held Alec’s gaze for a couple more seconds and turned to her. “Most shapeshifters can’t use other types of magic. Magic—the kind you’d think of—tends to override everything else. So when two shifters with a family history of magic have kids, sometimes there’s a kid who seems like a regular shapeshifter...until the magic ability manifests. And

they're..." His voice trailed off, and he shook his head. "They've usually got more raw power in their pinkie toes than I've got in my whole damn body."

"People *kill* them?" she asked, her face horrified.

"They're scared of them," Alec said softly. "Having that much power... There have been Seers in the past who've gone crazy from all that power, and done some horrific things."

Mackenzie's eyes went from Alec to Jackson. "You said Nick's got a sister who is one?"

"A twin," Jackson confirmed, hating the look on Mackenzie's face. "Her name is Michelle, and Alec is right. They probably would have killed her already if John Peyton wasn't so powerful." He attempted a smile and failed miserably. "Just another of those injustices we were talking about yesterday."

"Michelle's a good kid," Alec said firmly. "Maybe we should have Nick call her, ask if there are other Seers around. You'd think there'd be rumors."

"No," Jackson said, deep in thought. "Not yet. I need to get in touch with Mahalia. There's a friend of hers, a cougar, named Steven Donovan. I don't know how to contact him, but Mahalia would, and I..." He shrugged at Alec. "I don't want to call Michelle unless—or until—we absolutely have to. There's just too much political maneuvering going on with those damn wolves. No offense."

Alec just snorted. “Don’t forget that *you* can’t call her. Even if they let her talk to you, it could cause problems if spell casters from New Orleans started calling her. If they ever get even the slightest suspicion that she might not be loyal...”

Mackenzie made a disbelieving noise. “Are you honestly saying they would *kill* Nick’s sister over a phone call?”

“Probably not.” Alec didn’t take his eyes off Jackson’s face. “But it’s not worth the risk. Have Nick call her if you have to.”

“I’m not stupid enough to call Michelle myself. I have half a brain in my head.”

Alec’s blunt words were upsetting Mackenzie even more. She’d gone from bouncing her foot to twisting Kat’s chair back and forth, the movement bursting with nervous energy.

Her face was flushed, and her eyes widened when they met his. “I’m not feeling better anymore. I—I’m feeling worse.”

He lowered his hand to her shoulder. “Antsy?”

“I can’t sit still.” The color in her cheeks deepened as she stared at her hands. “I feel—”

The bell above the front door interrupted her, the sound barely fading before Kat exclaimed, “Holy *shit*.”

Jackson groaned. “Kat, what the hell are you doing here?” He was disconcerted, Mackenzie had some freakish nervous

condition, and the last thing they needed was an empath running around the office, soaking up their bad vibes.

Alec was out of his chair before the door swung shut behind Kat. “C’mon, missy. You are getting *out* of here. Now.”

Kat stared at Jackson, her eyes wide and face flushed, just like Mackenzie’s. “Oh, my. I, um—”

Mackenzie hid her face with her hands as Alec hustled Kat out the front door. “Fuck, she could feel that?”

Jackson stared at her, bewildered. “She’s an empath. She could feel pretty much anything that you—” His eyes narrowed as he took in her embarrassment and realization washed over him. “Oh. *Oh*.”

“It started this afternoon,” she admitted in a hoarse whisper. “Maybe the stress is getting to me. Or maybe it’s sexual frustration. But I really didn’t want to share it with anyone else.”

“Well...” He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck and tried not to sound too flustered. “What the... I mean, why’re you...?”

Before she could reply, the front door opened again and Alec stuck his head in. “I need to talk to you, Holt. Now.”

Jackson held up a hand, stammered an unintelligible noise at Mackenzie and followed Alec outside. “Look, whatever she’s got going on, it isn’t—”

Alec cut him off with an impatient gesture. “You can’t sit around waiting for Mahalia to call back. You need to get Mackenzie in a car and start driving, now.”

“What is it?”

His partner jerked his thumb over his shoulder to indicate Kat, who sat on a bench across the street, looking shaken. “If she’s feeling what Kat says she’s feeling, that girl is a ticking time bomb. I’d wager that whatever has been keeping her from shifting all these years is starting to fail.”

Jackson stared at him, confused. “That would make her *horny*?”

Alec returned his stare evenly. “You really want to waste time on the dirty details of shapeshifting and the adrenaline rush that comes with it, or do you want to get that girl some damn help? The longer you wait between changes, the harder it can be. Twenty-five *years* of it is something I don’t really want to imagine.”

He had a point. “Oh, Alec. Man, I am *not* the person to be handling this, not alone. I...” The words died on his tongue. He was nearly thirty damn years old; was he *really* about to tell his partner he needed a chaperone in order to be able to keep his hands off Mackenzie? Instead, he swallowed. “Can I borrow your car?”

“Sure.” Alec pulled the keys out of his pocket. “She’s hot and you’re interested, but this isn’t the time to indulge,

Jackson. Sex isn't going to make her feel better. In fact, it might make it a whole lot worse. If you have to, drug her ass or use magic or *something*. It's for her own damn good."

"Okay." Jackson took the keys, his mind whirling. "Get to Mahalia so she can bolster whatever is holding the cougar at bay, and absolutely no sex." He sighed, but the sound held more than a little bit of a growl. "I hate life right now. I'll call you from the road."

Mackenzie resisted the urge to change positions again. It didn't help. Instead she wrapped her hands around the strap of her bag and stared straight ahead, refusing to look at Jackson. Every time she did, the arousal that had been on low simmer all afternoon burst into full-on desire, and she could barely keep her hands to herself.

Even *thinking* about touching him made primal satisfaction unfurl slowly inside her. She stubbornly headed it off. "Can you explain this to me again?" she asked in a low voice, wrapping her fingers more tightly around her bag. "Maybe thinking will help. Or distract me."

"Explain what?" His eyes didn't leave the road. "The ants in your pants?"

She let out a strangled laugh. "That's one way to put it. You said Alec thinks it's some...spell or something?"

“Well, no. The spell would be what normally keeps you from getting this way.” He checked his mirror and signaled to pass. “It’s some sort of shapeshifter thing. The animal has to get out. When she doesn’t, you get restless.” He arched an eyebrow. “Sometimes *really* restless, I guess.”

Mackenzie groaned as she slid lower in the seat and closed her eyes. Every instinct in her body screamed for action. Her vivid imagination provided endless scenarios for how she could soothe the hot need twisting her into knots. The scene unfolded behind her eyelids like an erotic movie—pulling off the road, finding someplace secluded... She could almost smell the clean scent of his skin, could imagine how it would feel under her lips when she slid into his lap and nuzzled her face into his neck.

The earlier fantasies of long, hot lovemaking vanished. The frantic need inside her would be satisfied by nothing less than equally frantic sex. She wanted his hands and mouth on her skin, wanted to feel him writhing helplessly beneath her as she moved above him, driving them both into limp exhaustion.

A tiny whimper escaped as she fought back the image of his face, eyes hazy with pleasure and lips forming her name as she rode him to completion in the front seat of the car. “Oh, God. You have *no* idea how restless.”

He shot her a sharp look. “I suppose I... Hey, how about some music?” He cranked up the volume on the radio, and a

song with a low, throbbing beat spilled out of the speakers. He stared straight ahead as he stabbed a button with his finger, changing the station to one featuring talk radio.

Mackenzie stared out the window into the night and took a deep breath. “I don’t suppose you—I mean, it’s a bit of an odd proposition, but would you consider—” She snarled. “The sexual frustration is going to kill me.”

Jackson reached for his phone, hit a button and slapped it to his ear. After a moment, he said, “Yeah, it’s me. Look, about what you said... Yeah, what can she do about that? You know, that won’t—” He paused, obviously listening. “Yeah. Oh no, uh-uh. Okay, yeah. Later.” He snapped the phone closed. “Sorry, no sex. The bottom line is that you could die, and that would suck. You also can’t take care of it yourself, because you could weaken the spell even further.”

A tiny part of her curled in on itself in embarrassment when she realized Jackson and Alec had just had a discussion about whether or not she could masturbate. The rest of her just wondered if she could talk Jackson into taking the chance that she might not die.

“Jesus Christ.” She closed her eyes again. “Can we pull over at the next town, maybe get some food? The close quarters aren’t helping.”

“Absolutely,” he said immediately. “I think food is a great idea. We can walk around and stretch our legs too. Terrific idea, Mackenzie.”

“Terrific idea,” she agreed faintly. *Except we’re not even halfway there and I’m already losing my mind.* It was going to be a very long night.

The diner was small and cozy, and looked to cater mostly to truckers. Their waitress showed them to a booth without a word, setting two menus down before returning unprompted with a pot of coffee.

Mackenzie glanced at it, but caffeine wasn’t something she needed to add to her system. “Have you got any milkshakes?” she asked hopefully.

“Sure, honey. Chocolate or vanilla?”

“Vanilla, please.” She glanced across the booth at Jackson. “You drinking coffee?”

“Yeah. Got a lot of driving to do if we want to make it to Boca anytime soon.” He favored the waitress with a smile as he turned over his mug. “Fill ’er up, darlin’, and I’ll have an omelet as big as my head, with bacon, peppers and cheese, please.”

The waitress’s bored expression melted into an answering smile as she filled Jackson’s cup, Mackenzie apparently

forgotten. She seemed terribly impressed by Jackson's easy smile, and set aside the coffee pot as she jotted down his order. "Anything else with that, sweetheart? Sausage? Pancakes? We got some of the best muffins in the state here, if I do say so myself. Bake 'em fresh every night."

"He said he wants an omelet." At first, Mackenzie didn't even realize she'd spoken. Her voice barely sounded like her own, low and dangerous with a hint of menace. Color flooded her cheeks, and she avoided Jackson's eyes, wishing she could sink into the booth and disappear.

Jackson choked on his coffee, but recovered quickly enough to throw his head back with a laugh. "Now, now, sweet tart, I'll stick to my low-carb diet, but the nice lady's just doing her job." His smile turned sheepish. "That's what I get for marrying a health nut, I guess."

The woman turned back to Mackenzie, her expression cool. "And what would you like with your milkshake, ma'am?"

The urge to snarl at her again was so overwhelming Mackenzie dug her teeth into her lip and flashed Jackson a pleading look.

"She'll have a couple of those muffins," he said quickly. "Damn hypocrite's what she is, huh?"

As soon as the waitress retreated, Mackenzie folded her arms on the table and dropped her forehead to rest on them.

“What in hell is *happening* to me?” she demanded, though she wasn’t sure she wanted an answer. The intense desire to slide across the table and rub herself against Jackson to warn off the waitress was too disturbing for words.

“Well, you seem to be getting possessive there, darlin’.”

She raised her head and glared at him. “No, really?”

“Look.” He leaned forward earnestly. “This isn’t any more fun for me than it is for you, but it’s going to be one hell of a long trip if we can’t come to some kind of understanding about what I can and can’t ignore. The wiggling around on the car seat like a cat in heat? I can ignore it. But I can’t let you make some poor waitress’s life miserable just because I’m a charming bastard. She can’t help that.”

A powerful need to strangle him replaced the urge to climb into his lap. Her scowl deepened as she inched out of the booth. “I’m going to the restroom.” *Maybe to run my head under some cold water.*

Jackson unlocked Mackenzie’s door and swiped a hand across his forehead. They’d managed to finish dinner without further incident, and he had to credit his purposefully conceited comments with distracting Mackenzie enough to make it possible. “Watch the muffins,” he told her as she climbed into the car.

The look she gave him as she deliberately threw the muffins roughly into the backseat was hot and challenging, but at least it wasn't inviting. She seemed capable of switching back and forth between lust and rage with startling speed, but she'd been having a lot more success controlling the anger.

Thank God for that. Jackson rounded the car and opened his own door. It would be a lot easier to deal with her hating his guts than to smack her hands away from the button-fly of his jeans when she started feeling randy again. "All right, buckle up. Miles to go and all."

She took another of those deep breaths that seemed to be the only thing holding her together. "Damn it, I'm hungry." She twisted in her seat and reached for the bag of muffins.

Her shirt rode up when she stretched out her arm, revealing the smooth skin of her side and stomach. By some stroke of bad luck—or her own subconscious design—it happened just as she brushed against his arm.

Mackenzie froze, her skin still pressed to his, and moaned, low and needy and desperate. "I want you so badly."

He snatched his hand away and slammed his forehead on the steering wheel. "Okay, woman. You have *got* to have a little pity on me, here. Fucking around in the backseat could *kill* you."

She crowded against him suddenly, her body soft and her breath hot against his ear. "Right now I feel like *not* fucking

around is killing me too.” As if that wasn’t bad enough, she ran her tongue lightly along the shell of his ear.

Jesus God. He flattened himself back against the car door and batted her away. “Am I going to have to put you under?” he demanded.

For a moment—just a moment—something flashed in her eyes. The Mackenzie he’d been slowly getting to know stared back at him, and she looked terrified. Her fingers curled in his shirt. “Help me,” she half-sobbed. “I don’t want to—I can’t—”

He framed her face with his hands, breathed a word against her forehead and she shuddered.

The spell took effect, but not nearly as quickly as it should have. It seemed as if it had quieted the frantic battle inside her without putting her to sleep. Her blue eyes slowly cleared, and the hands clutching at his chest relaxed.

“Thank you.” The words were a barely audible whisper, and her eyes fluttered shut. When they opened again she looked dazed, as if her body was fighting sleep and losing. She leaned closer, her lips touching his cheek and then sliding to the corner of his mouth. “Thank you,” she breathed again.

She kissed him. It wasn’t frantic or desperate or aggressive like her earlier advances had been. Her lips were warm and soft, her kiss heartbreakingly gentle.

He relaxed into the caress, but she sagged against him, dragging him back to reality. Kissing her while she was in this condition was no better than doing so while she was drugged, so he pulled his mouth from hers and moved her back onto the passenger seat. “Sweet dreams, Kenzie.” He pulled the seatbelt across her body and fastened it. After another moment’s thought, he reclined the seat and brushed her hair from her face.

His phone rang, startling him, and he fumbled for his headset. “Hello?”

A rich voice filled his ear. “I know you’ve got a good reason for leaving fifteen frantic messages on my voicemail and scaring the living daylights out of me, don’t you, Jack?”

“Damn straight I do, Mahalia.” Jackson started the car and spared Mackenzie’s sleeping form another glance. “I’ve got a cougar trying to climb in my pants.”

“Is that some sort of clever euphemism?”

“I wish to hell it was, May.” He gritted his teeth as he pulled out of the parking lot. “I’m on the way to your place right now. *Tell me* you’ve got some experience with spells meant to keep the animal at bay.”

“Some, but not much. You’re coming to Boca Raton?”

“Yeah. I’ve got a woman here who’s in a bad way. Some extremely well-connected asshole has been stalking her across the country, trying to convince her to have his babies. She’s

never shifted, and now she's getting...frustrated. Besides which, there's something weird about her parents and a deadly house fire that maybe wasn't deadly at all..." He trailed off and exhaled roughly. "It's a fuckin' mess, May, pardon my French."

"A house fire?" Jackson could practically hear the gears turning in her head. "What was the name? Do you remember?"

"Evans. Why, does it ring a bell?"

She didn't answer. "Get here as fast as you can," she commanded. "I'm calling Steven."

"Hang on just a minute," Jackson protested. "What's going on?"

"I don't have time to explain, Jack. Just get your ass down here."

She hung up, leaving Jackson perplexed and frightened. Any situation that could put that edge of fear in Mahalia Tate's voice was serious enough to make a grown man piss his pants.

Jackson had to recast his spell twice before they hit Boca Raton, and it was becoming evident a fourth casting might be necessary. He drove as fast as he could toward the quiet

subdivision where Mahalia had decided to live out her retirement.

Mackenzie started whimpering again, a clear sign she was struggling her way free of the sleep spell. Under normal circumstances, it took eight or more hours for a person to wake from a single casting. He'd had to repeat the spell four hours after leaving the diner, and again three hours later.

It had barely been an hour since that last one.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph." He cranked the air conditioning in Alec's car as high as it would go to counteract the waves of heat wafting off Mackenzie's skin. He wasn't sure what would happen if the spell collapsed entirely, but he didn't want to wind up wrestling an upset, out-of-control cougar while driving down I-95.

And that was the best-case scenario.

Alec called when they were half an hour from Mahalia's, and Jackson snarled at him. "I hate you. I hate you, and you should die."

"The girl okay?" Mackenzie whimpered again before Jackson could respond, but she didn't sound aroused anymore. She sounded pained.

Alec swore loudly in his ear. "How long has she been doing that?"

“Since just outside of Orlando,” Jackson said shortly. “That’s her crawling out from under a third sleep spell, by the way.”

“Christ. How far away from Mahalia’s are you?”

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes.” He stomped on the accelerator. “She called her friend, the cougar I met before. It sounds like she’s already figured out what we’re dealing with here.” He hesitated. “I think she knows something about Mackenzie’s family, but she’s being remarkably close-mouthed about it.”

“Do you want me to come down there? This is starting to sound a lot bigger than a guy who can’t take no for an answer.”

“Nah. I’m going to wait and see what Mahalia and her friend say. You could hop a plane and get here in a few hours, if need be.”

Mackenzie fidgeted next to him, her breathing unsteady, and moaned in discomfort. Alec obviously heard, and swore again. “Call me when you get there, okay?”

“I’ll try to remember, but we might have our hands full.” Jackson hung up and looked over at Mackenzie again before signaling his exit from the interstate. “Well, darlin’. Looks like we might get you fixed up yet.”

Chapter Nine

She burned.

Inside and out, every inch of her, every nerve was on fire. Jackson's solid presence next to her presented a challenge and a seductive temptation. She could hear the way his heart beat too fast, could smell the tangy scent of sweat slowly overwhelming the clean smell of his soap.

He was scared. Some part of her that was still human knew that was bad—he was scared for her, scared she would hurt herself. That she might die.

The rest of her wanted to roll in the feeling, to stake her claim. He *should* be scared. He *should* be wary. She was strong, fast, powerful—and she wanted him.

She *needed* him.

She tried to tell him to run, to get away from her, but the word came out as a tortured whimper and he whispered soothing words. The rasp of his voice skittered down her spine like a hot caress, and she moaned again, bringing her knees to her chest in spite of the restricting seatbelt.

Pain spasmed through her, wiping away desire in a rush of stabbing agony. It felt as if every muscle in her body had seized at once, and she struggled for air, struggled to breathe—

She didn't realize the car had stopped until the passenger door opened and a cool hand brushed her forehead. The world stood still, and she felt utterly, absolutely at peace. She bumped her cheek against the hand, and she heard a man's voice as if from a great distance. "We don't have much time. I can't keep her calm for long. She's too strong."

The seatbelt slipped away, and she felt herself being lifted by a pair of strong arms. They cradled her to a chest that didn't smell like Jackson. Underneath the scent of aftershave and sweat was something familiar, something that made her curl closer as the frantic energy inside her focused.

This is what you are, came the purring thought, wrapping around her as she relaxed against the unfamiliar chest with a gentle sigh. *Home. You're home.*

"I'm home," she murmured softly, the words barely audible. With the rumbling inside soothed, it felt as if nothing in the world was more important than sleep. She gave in to it, drifting into oblivion with the stranger's gentle voice chasing after her.

"You're home, Jessica."

It had been five years since Jackson had seen Steven Donovan, but he looked almost exactly the same. His face was as impassive as Jackson remembered, but when he glanced up, his brown eyes were worried. “Let’s get her inside.”

Though she was dead weight, Steven managed Mackenzie easily, taking long strides across the lawn toward Mahalia’s Spanish-style home. Jackson snatched Mackenzie’s bag from the backseat along with the ridiculous sack of muffins.

Mahalia laid a hand on Jackson’s arm as they followed Steven. “You did the right thing by heading down when you did.”

“It was Alec’s idea.” The confession pained him. “I had no idea what was wrong with her.”

Her dark eyes were sharp, astute. “Why would you have had a reason to, Jack? Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

He held the heavy front door open for her and tried not to look too bleak. “We almost didn’t make it, May. It’s hard to pat myself on the back for that.”

Steven moved confidently through the house in the direction of the guest bedroom, but he spared Jackson a glance over his shoulder. “You have no idea what you’ve stumbled into the middle of, son. You *should* be patting yourself on the back for keeping her alive and getting her here.”

“Yeah, about that... Anyone want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Later.” Steven elbowed open the bedroom door and sat on the bed, keeping Mackenzie close to his chest. “We’ve got to deal with this now. The spell that’s holding everything in wasn’t meant to last this long. The man who cast it was supposed to remove it when she was a teenager.” Steven’s eyes met Mahalia’s, and Jackson had no trouble reading the guilt that passed between them.

He wanted to argue, to demand that someone tell him what the hell was happening, but he looked at Mackenzie and saw the truth of Steven’s words; she didn’t have *time* for that. So he glanced at Mahalia, whose normally dark skin had taken on a pallor. “What do I need to do?”

It was almost as if his words physically shook her. She blinked and started rolling up her shirtsleeves. “We need some things from the kitchen. Come with me.”

Jackson had no choice but to follow her into the bright yellow room down the hall.

She spun her spice rack as she walked by the butcher’s block and toward the pantry. “Grab some cumin and fennel. Some ginger too.”

He obeyed, pulling the bottles from the rack even as he wrinkled his nose. “I don’t use these things, May.”

“So shut up and ignore them.” She dug through a small burlap bag hanging inside the pantry door. “Here, red

sandalwood. They'll all be a calming influence for her, and she needs it, poor child."

Something in her tone stopped Jackson in his tracks. "Mahalia, how do you know Kenzie?"

For a moment, he thought she might answer. Then she shook her head. "There isn't *time*, Jack."

Back in the bedroom, they found Mackenzie stretched out on the bed, her head resting on a pillow at the foot of it. Steven knelt at the end of the bed, cradling Mackenzie's face as he whispered soothing words against her forehead. "This is as calm as she'll get."

Mahalia hesitated. "I taught you what to do, Jack Holt. Do it."

"I don't even know what we're doing." He opened the bottles and moved to the side of the bed. Mackenzie looked worse, and he shivered.

"The walls are already there." Mahalia laid the small piece of sandalwood on Mackenzie's chest and placed the woman's right hand over it. "We're just going to shore them up a little, that's all."

"We're not taking them down?" he asked, incredulous.

"*No.*" She snapped the word, sharp and vicious. "Jesus, no."

Jackson held the open bottles together and upended them, sprinkling the spices over and around Mackenzie's restless form. "She can't live like this."

"She won't," Steven said quietly. He stroked a lock of hair back from Mackenzie's forehead with a sigh. "But we need Michelle Peyton here before we try to break the spell. We probably have the experience, but even the two of you together don't have enough raw power. This spell is...formidable."

Jackson tossed the emptied bottles aside and knelt by the bed, confident Mahalia would take her place on the other side of it. "You're calling Nick's sister?"

Mahalia reached for him and rested their clasped hands on Mackenzie's solar plexus. "We don't have a choice. Now hush and concentrate. Steven, try to clear your mind and not suck up any of our power."

Jackson took a deep breath as he felt magic begin to flow from Mahalia over Mackenzie's body, into his and back again, taking some of his own power with it. He tried to focus on the magical walls already inside of her, but the memory of Mackenzie's laughter kept distracting him.

"Don't fight it, Jack," Mahalia whispered. "Use it."

They'd worked enough magic together for her to know him inside and out, and the exchange of energy often carried thoughts and emotions, as well. He squeezed his eyes shut and

remembered Mackenzie as he'd first seen her, laughing with Derek and Penny in Nick's bar. He recalled how she'd realized he was following her, been frightened and confronted him anyway. He thought of the way she'd smiled tentatively at him that first night and easily the next at his apartment.

It wasn't enough. He could see the walls, crumbling and dusty, straining to fall. Exhaustion pulled at him, and he could feel the same thing happening to Mahalia. "It isn't *working*," he grated out.

"Just hold on. Just a tiny—" Her voice failed her, and her hands trembled.

Jackson steeled himself and reached for the memory of the kiss Mackenzie had given him in the car, right before sleep had claimed her. Her mouth had been soft and obliging, and he ached to take her lips with his again when she was in her right mind, when something besides feral lust drove her into his arms.

Steven's voice floated to them, nothing more than a dim whisper. "It's working."

He felt the shifting inside Mackenzie, the surge of power that righted the walls, even as he struggled to draw air into his burning lungs. The magic began to ebb, to pull back like a wave already crested on the shore, and Jackson could only hope it had been enough.

Please.

The thought was fleeting, desperate, and Jackson wasn't sure whose it was, but it summed up his feelings pretty well, so he echoed it in his head as Mahalia pulled her hands from his with a weary sigh. "Steven?"

"It's done." He sounded relieved. "She'll sleep now, I imagine. You should probably do the same."

Jackson tried to respond, but his body felt leaden. He swayed and caught himself on the edge of the bed. The last thing he heard before he fell to the floor was Mahalia calling his name.

It was hard to tell how much time had passed when Jackson drifted awake again. Mackenzie curled next to him on the guest bed, fast asleep. Whoever had removed his shoes—Steven, probably, given the likelihood that Mahalia had been in no condition to do so—had removed Mackenzie's sweat-drenched clothes, as well, and tucked her back into bed in an oversized man's shirt.

She looked a hundred times better than when they'd arrived, her color returned to normal and her breathing slow and even. The expression on her face was peaceful.

He fought the urge to reach out, to brush an errant curl from her forehead. Instead, he rose, careful not to disturb her, and made his way down the hall.

He found Steven in the kitchen, making coffee. “Thanks for not letting me sleep it off on the floor.”

Steven smiled wearily as he reached for another mug. “You did a good job, Jackson.”

He rubbed his head and covered a yawn. “Most of it was May’s doing.” He accepted the steaming coffee Steven offered with a nod of thanks. “She’ll be out for a while yet, I guess.”

“Yes, she said to expect her to sleep for most of the afternoon.” Steven added cream to his own coffee. “I suppose you have a lot of questions.”

Jackson headed for the brightly lit breakfast nook and pulled out a chair. “They can wait,” he said, hesitant to seek answers Mackenzie would want, as well. “Well, mostly.”

“Mostly.” Steven took the seat across from his. “We should talk about the spell. I’m sure you got a sense of how strong it is.” He sipped his coffee and met Jackson’s eyes. “If you want to be really frightened, consider the fact that it was cast twenty-one years ago. I know because I was there when Zacharias cast it on her.”

Jackson almost dropped his mug. “Zacharias Nelson? Crazy Zach?” He didn’t wait for Steven’s confirmation, just rose from the chair again, nervous energy driving him across the tile floor. “What the hell kind of a thing is this, Donovan? First, someone shoulders past some of the most powerful wards I, myself, have ever seen to steal a shirt, and now you’re

telling me that notorious wizards were casting spells like that on Mackenzie as a toddler?”

“It was an unusual situation.” When Jackson glanced back, he found Steven staring into his mug. “I’ll explain the whole story when Mackenzie is ready to hear it. The short version is that her parents got mixed up with someone very powerful and very dangerous, someone who needs Mackenzie to complete a spell he started planning over forty years ago.”

He froze, something about Steven’s words triggering a memory. “You’re talking about Charles Talbot.”

“His adopted son, Marcus, would be the man who approached her.”

“Shit. It was the Seer.” He ran a shaky hand over his face and swore again. “Charles Talbot was in my house. Mackenzie—” Another thought occurred to him, and he crossed back to the table. “It’s not an urban legend, is it? He’s trying to make one. *The* one.”

Steven looked tired. “Yes. He’s trying to make a cougar who can transform humans. Mackenzie is supposed to give birth to that baby. And since we have to assume he knows she’s alive now...”

Jackson sat woodenly. “He won’t stop until he has her.” The words sounded as though they came from someone else, hollow and far away. “What do we do?”

The look on Steven's face was anything but encouraging.
“That's what we have to figure out.”

Chapter Ten

Mackenzie woke with a start, bolting upright in a strange room she'd never seen before. Panic rose in her as she took in the unfamiliar surroundings and looked at the man's shirt she wore. *I don't feel hung over...*

A sound drew her attention, and she let out the breath she'd been holding when she saw Jackson in a chair next to the bed. "What happened?"

He closed his phone and gave her a relieved look. "You were in a bad way. Sick, I guess you could call it. But we fixed you up." He reached over and touched her forehead gently. "How do you feel?"

"I feel—" She laughed when her stomach rumbled loudly. "Hungry."

His laughter joined hers. "Steven said you probably would be, so Mahalia's been cooking all afternoon. Want to go see what she rustled up?" He pulled her clothes, washed and folded, off the nightstand. "Do you need some help, or have you got your land legs already?"

“Steven?” She frowned as she swung her legs to the floor. She felt so shaky standing didn’t seem like a good idea. “Who’s Steven? Where are we?”

“We’re at Mahalia’s house.” He unfolded her pants and handed them to her. “Steven is her friend. He’s a cougar, like you.”

She digested that as she held the pants in her hands and stared at the floor. The last thing she remembered clearly was Jackson bringing her to his office after they’d realized someone had broken into his apartment. Now they were in Mahalia’s house, which he’d said was—

“We’re in *Florida*?” She jerked her gaze to Jackson’s face. “Jesus Christ, what time is it? What *day* is it?”

“It’s about seven in the evening,” he answered evenly. “Monday. We left New Orleans last night.” He placed her laundered shirt on the bed next to her. “Like I said, you were in a bad way.”

A bad way. It wasn’t the most informative description of how she’d lost a day of her life, but she wasn’t sure she wanted the details. Not yet, at least.

Her stomach rumbled again, reminding her that hunger was more important than answers right now. She stood and pitched straight into Jackson when her wobbly knees refused to hold her.

He caught her easily, sliding strong arms around her waist. “You okay?”

The warmth in his eyes made her feel wobbly for an entirely different reason. She stared at his face, so close she would only have to move a few inches to brush her lips over his. His chest was strong and solid, and desire rose in her with alarming speed. With it came memories from the previous twenty-four hours. She remembered heat, and need so strong there was no word for it but lust. She remembered pressing herself against him and sliding her tongue along his ear as she all but begged him to touch her.

Heat rushed to her face, and she dropped her forehead to his shoulder so she wouldn’t have to meet his eyes. “Oh, God. God, I think I’m starting to remember...”

“The ants in your pants,” he supplied gently. “Yeah, you were practically humping my leg. But that’s all right. It wasn’t really *you*.”

Mackenzie lifted her head and studied his expression. He seemed completely calm and understanding, as if women with magically induced lust climbed all over him on a regular basis.

On the heels of that thought came insane jealousy. She didn’t want other women crawling all over him. *She* wanted to crawl all over him. *Though not under the influence of magic...*

He held her, his arms firm around her waist. She slid her hands to his shoulders as she relaxed against his body. “It

wasn't me," she agreed in a quiet whisper. "I'd like to think I could be a bit more subtle."

He loosened his hold on her and straightened. "That makes two of us," he whispered, his gaze fixed on her mouth.

Though she'd been on plenty of dates and kissed a fair number of men, the way he stared at her lips brought a nervous flutter to life in her chest. She brushed her fingers lightly along the side of his neck. "I'm sorry." His skin was warm and smooth under her fingers, and she stroked higher until his hair tickled the back of her hand. "I'll try to be more subtle next time."

He leaned closer. "Right. Next time." The words were a puff of breath against her lips, and his mouth landed on hers in a soft caress that stole her breath. One of his hands twisted in her hair, urging her head back.

Oddly, he didn't seem compelled to hurry. Even after all the flirting, all the tension and what must have been an interminable drive through several states with her literally trying to climb into his lap, his mouth stayed slow and easy on hers. He kissed her with a determined thoroughness that made it clear he knew exactly what he was doing and planned on taking his time about it.

Oh, dear sweet Lord... Nowhere near as patient, she parted her lips with a soft moan. His touch made her body hum, his mouth made her hot with need—

And insistent hunger made her stomach rumble so loudly she heard it even over the frantic pounding of her heart.

Jackson smiled against her lips and pulled back, his breathing uneven. “Do you like fried chicken?”

Mahalia’s fried chicken would have been heaven even if Mackenzie hadn’t been starving. She ate a healthy serving of rice and corn along with it, enjoying the easy conversation Jackson and Mahalia kept up during the meal. As if by unspoken consensus, no one brought up the topic of why she and Jackson were there. Instead, Jackson related to Mahalia the latest gossip about the regulars at the bar, giving Mackenzie a chance to satisfy her hunger without feeling like she needed to talk.

Steven sat in silence, for the most part, sipping his iced tea and watching Mahalia and Jackson’s animated discussion. Twice during the meal he excused himself to take phone calls, stepping into the other room so they could only hear the quiet murmur of his voice.

Mackenzie had just turned down a third helping of chicken when Steven returned from taking another call. His sober expression caught everyone’s attention, and the relaxed atmosphere in the room shifted subtly.

He reached for his glass and took a sip before speaking. “That was John Peyton. He’s agreed that Michelle’s presence is necessary. He’ll be making arrangements.”

Mahalia turned to Jackson. “Call Nicole. She’ll need some time, if she’s going to leave the bar.”

He nodded and wiped his mouth with his napkin before rising. He headed out to the sun porch, digging his cell phone out of his pocket as he walked.

Mahalia fidgeted with a fork and smiled sheepishly when she caught Mackenzie watching her. “Times like this, I wish I hadn’t almost quit smoking.”

Mackenzie wrapped both hands around her glass. “I—I don’t suppose you could tell me what sort of time this is? I don’t really understand what’s going on.”

“It must be a lot to digest,” Steven said, his voice gentle. “Jackson told me that, until a few days ago, you didn’t know anything about the world you come from.”

The way he said it sounded like she was from another planet. “I didn’t. I mean, I always knew I was adopted. My parents—my adoptive parents—didn’t hide that from me. They always told me there’d been an accident and both of my birth parents had died when I was young. But I’ve never even seen a picture of them, much less heard that they were”—*freaks*—“shapeshifters.”

“I have a picture here.” Steven pulled out his wallet. “When May called and told me Jackson had stumbled across the little Evans girl, I got this out of my files before coming.” He found a small photo and slid it across the table.

Mackenzie picked it up with shaky hands. At first glance the woman in the picture could have been her. She had the same features, long, black hair, and smile. The eyes were different; where Mackenzie’s were bright blue, the woman had brown eyes so dark they almost looked black.

The man next to her was the complete opposite. Freckles dotted his pale skin, and bright red hair curled wildly around his head. What caught her attention, though, were *his* eyes. They were the same blue she saw in the mirror every morning, friendly and surrounded by smile lines even though they looked tired and worried in the picture.

“These are—” She couldn’t quite form the words. Her gaze went back to the woman, and this time she noticed the hand resting protectively on the prominent curve of her mother’s stomach. She looked six or seven months pregnant, but the expression in her face wasn’t one of happiness. She looked just as worried as the man, maybe more so.

Mackenzie flipped the picture over out of habit, and was rewarded with words written in neat block letters. “Simon and Janice,” she read aloud, her voice barely a whisper. “My birth parents?”

Mahalia leaned over and looked at the picture with a poignant mixture of sadness and nostalgia in her amber-colored eyes. “That was right after Steven told them,” she remembered. “That’s why they look so...” She let the words die. “They gave up everything to protect you from Talbot.”

“Talbot? But the man after me is named Foster. Marcus Foster.”

“The man after you is Charles Talbot. He adopted Marcus as a child.” Steven’s expression was just as troubled as Mahalia’s. “I wouldn’t say the boy isn’t dangerous, but he’s not the one behind all this.”

Jackson came back through the sliding glass doors. “Michelle already called Nick. She’ll be ready to fly down by the time Peyton gets his clearance from the board.” He stopped behind Mahalia’s chair. “I called Alec too. Figured we might need an extra pair of hands.”

“Smart boy. Now, sit so Steven can get on with it. There’s a lot to tell, and there may not be much time to get it all out there.”

Mackenzie resisted the urge to slide her hand into Jackson’s when he sat back down. Instead, she stared at the picture again. “You said this guy—Charles. He has a plan, I guess. But what *is* it?”

Steven looked at Jackson. “How much does she know?”

“I didn’t want to overload her.” He turned to Mackenzie and took one of her hands, wrapping his much-larger one around it. “Remember when I told you that only the wolves can transform others? Talbot’s trying to change that. That’s why Marcus kept insisting the two of you have to have babies. If you did—if it worked—that baby would be able to...” His voice lowered. “To make others like you. To change people into cougars.”

“Change?” She tightened her fingers around his. “But didn’t you say they do it by attacking people? What is this kid supposed to do? Go around clawing people up?”

He hesitated. “Biting, I guess. I’m not sure how it happens, but yeah. Attacks.”

“Just like the wolves,” Mahalia interjected. “It’s up to you, sweetie. If you think it sounds like a good idea, we’re not going to stand in your way. But Jackson led us to believe you’re not too fond of the thought of cooperating with their plan.”

“I thought he was crazy.” She closed her eyes. “He just kept telling me we had a destiny. He tried to tell me about the shapeshifter thing, but I didn’t believe him. God, I don’t know what to believe.”

“Do you want to see it?” It was Steven’s voice, quiet and steady. “Do you want to see me change?”

She didn't. She wanted to hide her head under a pillow and go back to a world where everything made sense and no one thought her destiny was to have magical babies. But that world wasn't there anymore. What's more, she *liked* the people she'd met in the new world—Nick and the regulars at the bar, and even Jackson's standoffish partner.

And Jackson. Her fingers tightened around his again, and she opened her eyes to find him watching her with concern. "All right. I want to see it."

They ended up in the back yard by the swimming pool, surrounded by a high privacy fence. Steven had already stripped off his shirt, showing off a body that was in impressive shape for a man who claimed to be over fifty.

He looked up as he pulled off his shoes and socks. "It's not like the movies and stories." He folded his socks neatly and put them in his shoes. "Unless you're wearing something very tight, changing forms is not going to produce dramatically ripped clothing. More likely, you'll just look absurd while you wiggle out of it. A cougar stuck in a pair of boxer shorts isn't a very intimidating sight."

She tried not to picture it, but the mental image formed anyway. She found herself choking back a laugh, and Steven flashed her a smile as he reached for his belt. "I normally wouldn't strip naked in front of a group of people to change, since I do retain the slightest hint of modesty, but I think it's

important you see the transformation itself.” The corner of his mouth quirked up, and he addressed Jackson. “Whether you stay to watch is up to you.”

Before he could answer, Mahalia let out a low whistle. “Show off.” The words were softened by the admiration in her eyes and voice.

Jackson groaned like a kid watching his parents kiss. “Yeah. Wouldn’t miss it.”

Mackenzie had to stifle another laugh as she caught Steven winking at Mahalia, and the emotional undercurrents she’d sensed between them at dinner made more sense.

She did her best to keep her eyes on Steven’s face as he unbuttoned his pants and let them fall to the ground, but she couldn’t help sneaking a glance at his naked form as he stepped back again.

He was in *really* good shape for a guy over fifty. *Let’s hope that’s a universal shapeshifter benefit.*

Steven cleared his throat, and she blushed when she realized he’d caught her wandering attention. He nodded once when she met his eyes again. “Here we go.”

She’d braced herself for a horrible transformation with snapping bones, rending flesh and pained noises. Instead she saw a brief shimmer, almost as if her vision had blurred, and Steven was gone.

A large cat stood on the grass, watching them with obvious intelligence. His head came up to her waist, and he paced forward with an easy grace that did nothing to hide the predatory danger in his stride.

Mackenzie crouched and put herself on eye level with him as she reached out a shaking hand to touch the side of his head. His fur was soft and the same reddish-blond of Steven's hair and beard. He remained still under her careful touch, not moving even when she stood again and backed away. "Holy shit. Holy *shit*."

"That about covers it," Jackson said in a low voice. "Amazing, isn't it?"

Mahalia appeared at Mackenzie's elbow. "Are you going to be okay?" She sounded nonchalant, as if people turned into animals in her back yard every day.

Mackenzie glanced at the woman next to her and tried to smile. "I'm not sure. I think I need some time to process it all, honestly. It's a lot."

"You said it, honey." She rubbed a comforting hand over the middle of Mackenzie's back. "I'm going to get the pie out of the icebox and start some coffee."

"That sounds great, May." Mackenzie looked up at Jackson's words and found him watching her carefully. "Just let me know if you feel like you're going to freak out or throw up, okay?"

The idea of freaking out was appealing, but it wasn't the best use of her time. Instead she rested her forehead on his shoulder. "I think I'll make it."

"Good." He brushed her hair away from her face. "Wouldn't want Steven to think seeing him naked is that traumatic."

"I heard that." Steven's voice drifted from behind her, and she hid her smile against Jackson's shirt. "I'm going inside. You two take your time."

She felt the chuckle rumble up in Jackson's chest. "Don't feel too bad for him. The bastard knows he has no business looking as good as he does. Damn shapeshifters, making the rest of us look bad."

Mackenzie felt her smile grow as she slid her arms around his waist. "I don't think you need to worry about looking bad." She trailed her fingers absently up his back, savoring the strength and warmth she felt even through his shirt. Simply touching him was soothing in a way it shouldn't have been, a way that had nothing to do with the sexual tension that had sparked between them the first moment they'd met.

"Yeah, tell me that in twenty years, when you still look thirty. I'll be pushing fifty and looking every inch of it, unlike our friend, Steven, there."

"Oh, quit whining." She made a face at him. "Fifty-year-old men bag thirty-year-old women all the damn time."

“Amen.” He gave her a warm grin. “Come on. Let’s go get some pie. We have more stuff to talk about.”

Two hours later, Mackenzie soaked in the bathtub as she mulled over everything Steven and Mahalia had patiently explained. Listening to convoluted descriptions of magical spells over pie and coffee was so surreal she’d felt the urge to pinch herself once or twice to see if she was dreaming. In some ways, she almost wished she *had* been.

Jackson had kept the details of their trip from New Orleans blessedly vague, saving her the embarrassment of having them know how close she’d come to killing herself just to get into his pants. She’d made it through their discussion of the deteriorating spell, and how Mahalia and Jackson had managed to strengthen it before she held up both hands and begged for a break.

It was too much to process all at once. She doubted she’d be able to work her way through it in a month, much less several hours. Thankfully, Mahalia had silenced Steven with a pointed look when he seemed about to insist they finish their conversation.

Half an hour of quiet reflection in the bath had led to one conclusion: she had to stop thinking about the entire situation or she was going to end up as crazy as she’d accused Jackson of being to begin with.

Luckily, he's an excellent distraction. She rose and wrapped a soft, oversized towel around her body. She had to use a second towel to wipe fog from the bathroom mirror, but she smiled at her reflection as she picked up a comb and worked it through her hair.

Yes, Jackson would be an excellent distraction. Maybe once they figured out how to save her from the power-mad shapeshifter with dreams of dynastic domination, she could settle down and see if maybe Jackson could be more than a distraction. If New Orleans could be more than a pit stop.

Maybe she could have a life again.

Mackenzie was still smiling when she stepped through the bathroom door, her hair in a damp braid and her clothes exchanged for one of the comfortable, expensive silk nightgowns Nick had insisted on adding to their purchases during their afternoon of shopping.

Jackson sat on the end of the bed, his phone to one ear. “No, Nick. It’s not—” He sighed. “It’s fine for now. Just wait and come when Michelle... Yes, she’s right here, and we’re taking excellent care of her. Yeah.” He held out the phone. “Nick wants to talk to you.”

Mackenzie accepted the phone and perched on the bed next to him. “Hey, Nick.”

“Are they breaking your head with all the supernatural crap?” she demanded immediately. “I told Jackson I’ll kick his ass if they’re freaking you out.”

She couldn’t help laughing. “No, they stopped when I begged them to. I have a feeling I’m going to be getting more remedial supernatural lessons tomorrow, though.”

“Christ.” Her boss’s irritation was clear. “Tell them I said to lay off, all right? They’ve had years, even their whole lives, to learn this stuff. You need *time*.”

“Maybe.” She tugged her braid over her shoulder. “But I don’t think I have time, Nick. Not with some superpowerful lunatic after me.”

“Well, you being crazy, too, isn’t going to help anybody.”

She was about to answer when Jackson snatched the phone back. “Nicky, I love you, but your alpha bitch is showing again. Rein her in, why don’t you?” He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, right back at you.” He closed the phone and grinned. “Luckily, she’s in another state and can’t actually kill me right now.”

Mackenzie raised an eyebrow. “I thought she was coming here to meet her sister.”

“Michelle won’t be able to make it for a few days.” He leaned back on his elbows. “It isn’t easy for her to get away. The Conclave has to approve her involvement in potentially sticky situations like this.”

It was impossible not to let her eyes wander with his lean body stretched out next to her. He was handsome as sin, all right, and exactly the sort of man she'd never been able to resist. She inched higher on the bed and curled on her side with her head propped on one hand. "Nick's sister can't travel without permission?"

"Nope. She's powerful, dangerous. The Conclave maintains complete control over her all the time. She even has a bodyguard who's... Well, he's not so much there to protect her as to spy on her and report back."

That distracted her momentarily from thoughts of kissing Jackson. She studied his face, her eyebrows drawing together in a frown. "You're serious, aren't you? That's—" *Terrifying*.

"It's crazy, I know." Jackson rolled to his side, his pose mimicking hers, and flashed her a look that was equal parts sympathy and apology. "Supernatural society, on the whole, isn't any different from the human one you're used to, Kenzie. There's bigotry and fear and horrifying realities I generally prefer not to think about too much. It's not always pretty, but it's the way things are."

"Not always pretty" was an understatement. She rolled back and stared at the ceiling as she considered the things she'd learned. "Are there good things? I mean, you'd think having that power would be an advantage, but so far it seems

like the only people who aren't miserable or crazy are the ones who have nothing to do with supernatural society."

"Well, Alec and I have been able to help a lot of people thanks to our abilities. Nick too. But there are responsibilities, real ones *and* the ones other people try to lay on us." He rubbed her arm reassuringly. "I guess it all depends on whether you want to let other people's expectations define you."

"I guess." She caught his hand and twined their fingers together. "I think I've had enough deep thoughts on the universe for the night."

Jackson stroked his thumb over the back of her hand. "Good. I'm getting tired of focusing on the negative when, usually, things aren't really so bad."

"Things don't seem so bad right now," she agreed quietly. "I got great homemade food, a nice long bath, and now I've got a handsome gentleman to cuddle next to. My life hasn't been this nice in a long time."

"That's too bad. I think you should get this pretty much all the time."

Their banter could have gone back and forth for a while, but Mackenzie didn't have the patience to wait. Not with the memory of his earlier kiss, not with the way his voice made her heart pound. He wanted her as badly as she wanted him, and there was no reason not to give in. No reason at all.

So she leaned in and kissed him.

Chapter Eleven

Jackson knew Mackenzie was going to kiss him long before she pressed her lips to his, and there were about a million reasons why he should have stopped her. Not surprisingly, he couldn't think of a single one.

Her mouth was warm and dry, and it opened slightly as it touched his, the sensation dragging a low groan from his throat. He lifted a hand to her neck, relishing the fact that her skin was just as soft as it looked. Self-control and self-denial were beyond him, and he rolled to bring her body under his.

She hummed in pleasure, and her fingers slid into his hair. She held his mouth to hers as her tongue swept across his lower lip in teasing invitation before retreating again.

He groaned again and deepened the kiss, his tongue sweeping the inside of her mouth, tasting and exploring. It was maddening, and desire built in him with shocking speed as he lowered one hand to her hip and encountered soft silk. If she'd have been wearing this damned scrap of nothing at his apartment, he wasn't sure what would have happened. He broke the kiss and whispered breathlessly, "I love this gown."

Her voice sounded just as breathless, and warm with invitation. “I was hoping you would. It’s the only reason I let Nick buy it.”

He gathered the midnight blue silk in his hand and rubbed it against her skin. “How’d you find one the same shade as your eyes?” He nuzzled her neck. “Serendipity?”

“I was due a little good luck.” Her head arched back, giving his lips free rein over the soft skin of her throat. She moaned when his mouth reached the spot where her neck and shoulder met. “God, I’ve wanted to touch you since the moment I first laid eyes on you. You are unfairly sexy, Jackson Holt.”

“Quit stealing all my good lines.” He whispered the words in a path over her jaw, all the way back to her mouth. This time, their kiss was hot, insistent. Her response was just as enthusiastic as she arched into him and made soft, needy noises.

Her fingers left his hair and slid down his shoulders and back. The hem of his shirt bunched in her hands, and she urged it up.

Jackson tore his mouth away with a sharp exhalation. He wanted to feel her skin against his, wanted to sink into her, make her scream. “Hang on, Kenzie. We can’t do this.”

“Right,” she panted, looking dazed. “Bad guys. Serious situation. Not the time for hot, hot sex.” She took a slow, deep breath and let it out on a moan. “Damn it.”

He couldn’t drag his gaze away from her mouth. “Damn it,” he echoed in agreement. “I’m going to go...away, and you stay here. Uh, sleep would be good. I’m...going.”

Her lips seized his again in a brief but passionate kiss. “Sleep.” She kissed his chin and his jaw. She found his ear and her breath was warm and tormenting as she whispered, “But when this is over, we are going to have the kind of insanely hot sex that takes hours to finish and days to recover from.”

Going away suddenly didn’t seem nearly so important. “I’m intrigued.” He dragged his thumb over her lower lip. “Tell me more.”

Her tongue snuck out to tease his thumb. “I’m a dancer, remember. You wouldn’t *believe* some of the ways I can bend. And I guess I’ve got super stamina or something now too.”

Jackson stifled a groan and bit her ear. “Bendy, with super stamina. Christ, this is sounding too good to wait.”

“The bad guys aren’t breaking down the door yet.” She offered it almost hopefully, her voice delightfully husky. “We could compromise a little...”

Focus, Holt. This is a bad idea... He slid his hand under her nightgown to caress her leg. “Good idea.”

She pulled at the hem of his shirt again. “Off. Take this off—”

Jackson yanked the T-shirt over his head. “You know Steven can hear us, right?”

She froze for a second, her hands hovering an inch away from his chest. Then she groaned and grabbed him, her short nails digging into his shoulders as she dragged him against her. “He can go outside. Or get earplugs.”

“Not sure that’ll help.” He lowered his face to her neck and caught her delicate skin between his teeth. “Are you usually loud?”

She gasped sharply, cupping the back of his head as she arched her neck into his touch. “Depends on how much encouragement I’m getting. You seem good at encouraging.”

“I feel pretty damn motivated right now.” His fingers skated up her thigh again and found the thin, elastic edge of her panties. He fought back a moan and licked the skin he’d bitten. She rewarded him with another breathy moan as her legs inched apart in silent invitation.

Jackson barely hesitated before venturing under the expensive silk to explore the softness of her body. She arched into his touch, and he kissed her neck and skipped back to her lips.

She kissed him with a desperate need, open mouth and low gasps and her tongue teasing its way past his lips to tangle

with his. There was nothing shy or hesitant in her kiss, just desire for him and an eagerness that made his hands shake.

Mackenzie tangled her fingers in his hair and tugged him back so she could wiggle out from beneath him. She rose to her knees on the bed, flushed and breathing heavily, and her hands shook as she curled her fingers around the edge of her nightgown and pulled it up. “I want you so much, Jackson.”

He leaned back on the bed and gave her his hottest, laziest grin. “What if *I’m* loud?”

“Steven and Mahalia can yell at *you* tomorrow.” The fabric inched up, revealing the soft silk panties he’d touched before. A little higher and his gaze slid over the smooth, pale skin of her stomach. Her gentle, warm laughter filled the room as she paused with the nightgown barely covering her breasts. “If you can walk by the time I’m done with you.”

He tackled her to the pillows, laughing at her startled shriek. “I think you might be the one in danger of diminished locomotion, darlin’.”

“Oh yeah?” She lifted her arms to rest on the pillows, leaving her nightgown clinging to the undersides of her breasts. “You think you’re that good?”

He nudged the silk up a little more and bent to taste her skin. “Determined. That’s what I’d call myself.”

“Oh—” The silk slid away to bare one breast and a tight nipple. “Oh, God, I want you—”

He fought for control, finally trusting himself enough to tease the puckered flesh with the tip of his tongue. “No more talking. Just let me...”

She broke through his words with a low moan that shot fire through him. “Let you what?”

“Let me love you for a minute.” He trailed his hand slowly over her hip, giving her time to stop him before he edged his fingers beneath the silk of her underwear again. He exhaled slowly, one long, hot breath over her breast, and sucked her nipple into his mouth.

She clutched his head and made a quiet, choked noise. “You can love me for a lot of minutes.” Her body trembled as his fingers slid lower, past the soft skin of her abdomen. “Maybe for hours.”

Jackson inhaled the soft, floral scent of her skin as his hand slipped between her legs. She was wet, hot, and he stifled a groan against her breast.

Mackenzie made another yearning sound and arched into his touch. He wanted to forget the danger and take her, feel her heat cradling his cock and the sweet slide of her skin over his. He couldn’t afford to lose himself in her, not right now...but he could touch her. Just for a while.

She didn’t make it easy. Her hips rocked against his hand in tiny, needy movements, and her quiet whimpers tore at the jagged edges of his self-control. Worse was the way she

whispered his name, throaty and low and full of passion. “Jackson—yes—”

He couldn’t stop his own rocking as his hips rubbed her thigh. He squeezed his eyes shut and panted. “Kenzie.” He clenched his jaw and searched with his fingers, alternating soft and firm touches, trying to find the one that would make her shake, make her voice break over his name.

He knew he’d found it when she tensed and gasped, her eyes flying open. “Oh, God—right there—” Her hand dropped to his shoulder, and he felt the delicate sting of her fingernails. “Don’t stop—”

Jackson covered her mouth with his, muffling her cries as he stroked her. She was gorgeous, perfect as she writhed beneath him. He ached to fill her, but his discomfort was barely noticeable compared to the warm flush of excitement he felt at bringing her such pleasure.

He swallowed her low cry when she came, and he swore he almost *felt* her climax sweep through her. Magic blazed between them, all gentle heat and heavy pleasure as her body went taut against him. He shuddered and nipped at her lips as her energy prickled over his skin, and she moaned against his mouth and collapsed back to the bed.

Jackson didn’t dare move, so he kissed her mouth and cheek and exhaled shakily. “Okay?”

“Okay?” Her voice came out flatteringly breathless. “Jesus. More than okay. So much more than okay.”

He couldn’t hold back the satisfaction that flared at her words. “Good.” He pressed another kiss to her cheek. “Now I really, *really* need to go.”

She still looked dazed, but her expression faded from sleepy and sated to perplexed. “Wait, what? You can’t go.” Her hip rubbed his erection and she smiled. “That’s not fair.”

He swallowed his groan. “Neither is life in general, darlin’, and more’s the pity.”

Her lips sought his, and she kissed him gently, tracing her tongue over his lower lip. “I’m not going to pin you down and force you to have hot sex with me, but I’m more than willing.”

He rolled away. “If I don’t go now, Mahalia will whip my ass. Hell, she might do it anyway.”

Mackenzie laughed. “You’re scared of a sweet little lady. That’s cute.”

He stared at the ceiling fan and willed his heart to slow its pounding. “She is sweet. Until she thinks you’re taking advantage of some pretty young thing in trouble.”

Her fingers trailed lightly up his arm. “Want me to tell her *I* took advantage of *you*?”

He eased off the bed. “Then she might whip your ass. She’s protective of me.”

She chuckled again, low and warm and with a husky, sated edge that made it hard as hell to keep from turning around and climbing back over her, sliding into her. “Fine. But just because I’m letting you go now doesn’t mean I’m not going to pounce on you as soon as the bad guys are taken care of.”

“I’ll consider that a promise.” He chanced a look at her, taking in her disheveled hair and flushed skin. “Sleep tight, Mackenzie.”

Her lips curled in a lazy smile. “Good night, Jackson. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Jackson thought that maybe a dip in the pool would help cool his libido, but he didn’t get past removing his shirt before Mahalia’s voice stopped him. “Hang on a second, Casanova.”

He turned to find her sitting in a wrought-iron chair on the patio, smoking. “You know those things’ll kill you, right?”

“Not before you do, kid.” She flicked ashes onto the grass. “You two ran Steven off.”

“He heard?”

“Yeah.” She looked annoyed. “He heard.”

Jackson snorted. “Oh, I’m sorry, did I interrupt your booty call?”

“Hush your mouth.” The words lacked heat, and Mahalia fastened him with an appraising stare. “Do you really think you need to be messing around with that girl right now? With everything she’s gone through, not to mention what she’s got ahead of her?”

He had to look away. “It’s not like that, May.”

Mahalia tilted her head. “*Tsk*. I saw you earlier, Jack. She lights you up.” She held up a hand to halt his protest. “Mind you, I don’t think that’s a bad thing. If you find someone who makes you feel that way, you should grab ’em and hold on. The problem is the situation.”

Jackson wanted to deny it, all of it. He wanted to say he liked Mackenzie just fine, but there was nothing going on between them. But the way she’d felt beneath him wasn’t nothing, so he shrugged at his mentor. “What do you want from me?”

Her answer was firm. “I want you to say that you’re thinking with more than your dick, and I want you to mean it.”

“Jesus, May.” Jackson’s cheeks heated. “Fine. I’m thinking with more than my dick.”

She extinguished her cigarette. “All right.”

“I mean it,” he insisted. “Nothing happened, because this whole thing is just messed up, and that’s no way to start something.”

“No, it isn’t.” She rose from her chair. “I remember when I first met you, Jack. You were...miserable. Working that awful job at the insurance company, no friends. But you always smiled and joked, and not a single one of the regulars at the bar knew just how unhappy you were.”

As a cautionary tale, its clarity was questionable. “I’m not sure I get your meaning, May.”

She sighed. “If you can let this woman see beneath all that good ol’ boy bullshit, I think she could be good for you. And I *know* you could be good for her.”

She was warning him again, he was sure of it, but he just grumbled, “I’m going to go pull out the sofa in the living room.”

Mahalia smiled. “Good boy.”

He made a face and reached for the sliding glass door.

“Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“She’d be lucky to have you.”

Jackson was watching infomercials on the converted sofa bed when Steven came back. He nodded to the older man as he flipped channels. “Sorry about earlier. You didn’t have to go.”

Steven leaned against the doorframe and gave him a flat look. "I really did."

"Mahalia already read me the riot act. Not that I needed it," he added pointedly.

Steven dropped into the chair beside the couch. "I'm heading to the airport in the morning. I can't do anything to help until Peyton arrives, and my presence could put you all in danger. But there are things you need to know before I go. Things *she'll* need to know when she's ready. You're going to have to tell her if I can't."

Jackson turned off the television. "All right."

Steven closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I have to leave because there's no spell you can cast to hide me from Charles Talbot." A bitter smile tugged at his lips as he opened his eyes again, and the look in them was chilling. "Blood calls to blood. That's what Mahalia says. He's my uncle."

Jackson just stared at him, trying to make sense of his words. "That's why you were helping Mackenzie's parents. How you even knew they needed help. Jesus."

"It was supposed to be voluntary," Steven said quietly. "Cougar couples who believed in Charles's dream, who were willing to work with him. I wasn't around much because I was the one who traveled the country to *find* them. The first couple I brought to him had a baby boy. Marcus. The next time I

came home, they were dead and Charles was raising Marcus as his own son.”

“Talbot killed them.” It wasn’t a question.

“The closer he got to success the more...unbalanced he became.” Steven rubbed at the side of his face. “It seems brutal, the way the wolves treat Michelle, but there’s a reason Seers are so feared. Having access to that much power... Charles started to think he could play God.”

Anger welled in Jackson with surprising speed, and he rose from the sofa bed and began to pace. “Except he wasn’t just *playing* God, was he? He was getting it done, and you were helping.”

Steven didn’t defend himself, only nodded. “Yes. I was helping. I’ve tried to tell myself over the years that I didn’t know, but there’s nothing I can do to change what happened. All I can say is that as soon as I realized he wasn’t looking for willing participants, I tried to make it right.”

Jackson fought to calm himself. Whatever Steven’s role in Talbot’s operation had been, it was ancient history. “Mackenzie was already on the way, so you took her parents to New Orleans. To Mahalia.”

“I’d met her during one of my trips,” Steven confirmed. “She wasn’t powerful enough to hide them forever, but we needed to keep them safe until Jess—until Mackenzie was born. She watched over them and did her best to hide them

while I tracked down Zacharias. It took four years to find him. Even then he was a virtual recluse.”

Jackson leaned on the arm of the couch. “Wait, so... Mahalia knew Mackenzie after she was born?”

“No. She cast the spells, but they didn’t stay in contact. They were only supposed to call Mahalia if there was an emergency, even after Zacharias cast his spell. Simon and Janice called her when Charles came after them, but by the time we got there all that was left was an empty, burned-out house.”

“The fire that supposedly killed them all.”

“Yes. That’s the end of what I know. Janice, Simon and Jessica Evans disappeared. I didn’t believe any of them had survived until Mahalia called me.”

Jackson nodded, his jaw tight. “We’ll have to get the rest of the story from Talbot when we find him.”

“Jackson—” Steven’s expression was serious. “You *have* to understand what we’re dealing with. Charles isn’t just powerful; he’s experienced. He’s had over sixty years to fine-tune his skills, and he has more raw power than anyone you’ve ever met. If we get the chance, we take him out. No questions, no complicated plans and no asking him why. It’s the only way Mackenzie will *ever* be safe.”

Jackson ran his hands through his hair. “If he’s so damn powerful, how exactly are we supposed to take him out in the first place? Do we have a plan?”

“We have Michelle.”

“*That’s* your plan?” Jackson asked, incredulous. They couldn’t throw Nick’s sister at Charles Talbot and hope she managed to best him. “Will there be a steel cage involved, or is this going to be more of a street fight?”

Steven sighed. “That’s not the plan. But she’s the only one with a chance of stopping him, and unless you can tell me exactly what she’s capable of, I don’t know *how* to plan at this point. Mahalia has the experience and Michelle has the raw power. We’ll do what *they* think will work.” His smile was self-deprecating. “I’m just the muscle.”

Jackson dropped to the sofa again. “I’m sorry. I feel so damn *helpless*. But that’s not your fault, so I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

“You like her.”

Jackson played dumb. “Who, Mahalia?”

Steven snorted.

Jackson shot him a look. “Fine, yes. I like Mackenzie. I thought that much would have been obvious, seeing as how you had to leave when she and I started making out.”

“I didn’t ask if you wanted her. You’re both young, attractive and dealing with a lot of stress. Sex wouldn’t be

terribly surprising. I was asking if there was something more going on.”

It was Jackson’s turn to snort. “I tend to save my requests for casual sex for women whose lives *aren’t* in danger, thanks.”

“I suppose I screwed up taking care of her and have no right to worry now.” He shrugged. “I want to do a better job this time. Take care of her, Jackson.”

“I will,” he promised. “Don’t worry about her.”

“Take care of Mahalia too,” Steven added with a grin. “Just don’t tell her I told you to. She’ll kick both of our asses.”

“Will do. Thanks, Steven.”

Steven smiled as he rose. “Good night, Jackson.”

“Night.” Jackson watched him go, trying to not to think about the fact that the man was headed in the direction of Mahalia’s bedroom. Instead, he settled back down on the sofa bed and retrieved the remote control again.

Chapter Twelve

It was a sign of how much better she felt about the world in general that Mackenzie didn't panic when a gentle hand on her shoulder woke her. She rolled over with a sleepy yawn and blinked at Jackson's face in the dim light. "Hey."

He smiled softly as he lowered himself to the bed. "Hey. Mahalia's making breakfast and Steven just caught a cab. It's safest for everyone if he leaves now."

His words distracted her from how nice it was to wake up to his smile. "What do you mean? Why are we safer if he's gone?"

"Because Talbot can find him," he answered simply. "Maybe easier than he can find the rest of us. It's hard to explain."

She took him at his word and moved closer to slide her arm around him. "You're staying here though, right?"

"Of course I am."

Mackenzie smiled, feeling surprisingly at peace. A full night's sleep in a comfortable bed had done wonders for her

state of mind. So had the memory of how amazing Jackson's body had felt pressing hers into the mattress.

"We said no sex," she murmured as she rubbed lazily at his back, "but what are your feelings on good morning kisses?"

"Acceptable under most circumstances." He wrapped a lock of her hair around his finger. "Is that a purely hypothetical question, or were you planning to ravish me?"

She probably had morning breath and most of her hair had escaped its braid to tangle wildly around her head, but she didn't care. "It depends. Hypothetically, do you have anywhere else you need to be?"

He considered the question with too much deliberateness to be believed. "Hmm. I was going to take a shower, but I might have a little time. Maybe just a few smooches. Like this." He feathered a kiss across the tip of her nose.

The gesture made her laugh as she played with the hair at the back of his head, just above his neck. "I'm going to kiss you." She whispered the words against his cheek. "Really, really kiss you. Open mouths and tongues and maybe some whimpering. If you're not interested, you might want to run."

Heat flared in his eyes, darkening them. "Oh, I'm interested."

“Good.” She only had to shift her mouth an inch to the side to catch his lower lip between hers, and she ran her tongue teasingly along it before kissing him in earnest.

He moaned softly and tilted his head, bringing his lips closer to hers, his tongue delving into her mouth as he cupped the back of her neck. His warm, strong fingers on the sensitive skin made her shiver.

She wasn’t sure when she made the conscious decision to move, but she was suddenly on her back, her arms around him as he leaned over her, his mouth leaving hers to skim over the edge of her jaw to her throat. “Is this going to hold you over?”

“No.” She laughed and tilted her head back, loving the feeling of his lips on her. “But I suppose I’ll manage somehow. Especially since Mahalia’s all of thirty feet away right now.”

Jackson rose from the bed. “I’ll be out of the shower in time for pancakes, so save me some, all right?”

“Better hurry. I’m hungry, and she’s a great cook.”

“No argument here.” He gave her an almost tender look before disappearing through the door. Mackenzie crawled out of bed with a bemused smile. It was far too easy to ignore the life-changing events of the past weeks and give in to the giddy thrill that always came with a new crush, or a new—

Relationship? The thought stopped her, and she stood next to the bed with her pants in her hands. A relationship was the last thing she needed at the moment. And yet...

The bemused smile returned, and she couldn't shake it while she cleaned up and brushed her hair, or while she pulled on her clothes. She couldn't even banish it when she walked into the kitchen to greet Mahalia. "Good morning."

"Morning, Mackenzie." The older woman stirred a bowl of what looked like batter. "Do you like buttermilk pancakes? How about some orange juice? I made Steven squeeze it fresh this morning."

"Really?" Mackenzie leaned against the counter and watched as Mahalia moved efficiently around her kitchen. "I've never had fresh-squeezed orange juice."

"What?" One perfectly groomed eyebrow rose in surprise. "Now, that just isn't right. You like sausage or bacon, honey?"

"Either's fine. Can I help you with anything?"

Mahalia waved her away. "Sit down and rest. You've been through a lot, and it isn't over yet."

"I suppose it isn't." Mackenzie took a seat and drummed her fingers absently on the smooth wood of the table. "Jackson said Steven had to go. That Talbot could find him?"

"Mm-hmm." Mahalia began to pour the batter on a heated griddle.

“I don’t really understand. But I guess there’s a *lot* of stuff I don’t understand.” She still wasn’t sure she wanted to, if she was going to be perfectly honest with herself.

Mahalia hesitated as she reached for a spatula. “That part, at least, isn’t complicated,” she admitted. “Talbot will always be able to find Steven because he’s Steven’s uncle.”

“He’s—” She stopped. “Oh. That’s why Steven knows so much about him?”

“That’s why,” she confirmed. “Before you were born, Steven was helping Charles. He thought... Well, he believed his uncle when he said this scheme was the only thing that would save the cougars.” She stared at the griddle, her amber eyes unseeing. “It took him a while to figure out how far Charles would go, though. The things he would do to ensure the ritual’s success.”

Mackenzie considered that as she watched tiny holes appear in the top of the pancakes. “What about Marcus? Is he like me? A kid someone had to...to further this cause?”

“His parents were killed.”

She pulled her gaze away from the pancakes and studied Mahalia, whose tone made it clear she knew more than she’d said. “Who killed them?”

Mahalia glanced away. “They wanted out, I suppose.”

It wasn’t much of an answer, but it was enough. Whoever his parents had been, they hadn’t agreed with Charles’s plan,

and Charles had killed them. Just like her parents. Maybe Marcus hadn't been lying when he'd said they had more in common than she could ever guess. "So Steven warned my parents, and they left?"

"He had to do more than warn them," Mahalia corrected. "He got them out, got them away." The faraway look came back into her eyes. "Brought them to New Orleans. To me."

Mackenzie had never wondered much about her birth parents, but now she couldn't stop thinking about them. What sort of people they'd been, why they'd decided to throw in with Charles's plans. Mahalia obviously didn't like talking about it, but Mackenzie couldn't stop her questions. "What were they like?"

At first, she wasn't sure if Mahalia had heard her. The older woman reached into a drawer and drew out a crumpled pack of cigarettes, sighing as she pulled one from the pack and struck a lighter. "Young. Disappointed. Scared."

"Oh." She could imagine that easily enough, all things considered. "I guess it wasn't really a time for social chats."

"Simon and Janice were very nice. They were just like Steven, and Marcus's parents. They bought into Charles's assertions that their race was dying out, because it's true. Then they found out he was a fanatic. One apparently willing to kill a couple and take their child to raise as his own." Mahalia took

a drag from the cigarette. “Saying it wasn’t exactly a social situation is a bit of an understatement.”

Mackenzie felt color come to her cheeks as she looked at the table. “It’s hard to imagine it. A few days ago, I thought my parents had died in a car crash when I was four. I didn’t remember much of anything from before my adopted parents brought me home. Sometimes I’d have dreams...” A fire, a woman with dark hair and terrified eyes dragging her by the hand, screaming that they had to run faster. The nightmares had plagued her until her parents had taken her to a therapist in the fourth grade.

The dreams hadn’t gone away, not completely. She’d had trouble sleeping most of her life, between the dreams of running through fields and the dreams of running from fire. When she’d gotten older she’d gone through all the usual remedies—special teas, pills, relaxation tapes. Nothing had ever worked. Not until she’d started dreaming about Jackson every time she closed her eyes.

Mahalia finished her cigarette and extinguished it in a weak stream of water from the kitchen tap. “It was a rough time for all three of you.”

“I guess it was.” Determined to change the subject, she rose to her feet again. “I think I’d like some of that juice. Where can I get a glass?”

Mahalia didn't answer, just stared at the water trickling into the sink. The cigarette butt fell from her hand, and she started to shake.

"Mahalia?" Mackenzie reached out a hand to her shoulder. "What's—"

She jerked as if burned, scrambled to shut off the stove's burners and grabbed her keys from the counter. "Get into the garage. Jack!"

Mackenzie didn't argue. She hurried to the door on the other side of the kitchen, so panicked she twisted the knob without bothering to unlock the door first. She swore and reached for the latch, but a soft gasp behind her made her turn.

Mahalia's dark skin had taken on an alarming pallor, and her eyes rolled back in her head. Mackenzie stared in horror as Mahalia fell, her head impacting the counter with a sickening thud.

Time slowed to a crawl as Mahalia crumpled. Mackenzie lunged toward her, hitting the floor on her knees and sliding a few inches. She screamed Jackson's name as she pushed Mahalia's hair back from her face. There seemed to be blood everywhere, so much that, at first, Mackenzie couldn't tell where the wound was.

"Mahalia!" She swore fiercely under her breath as she tore her shirt over her head, balled it up and pressed it against

the wound. *Shit, shit, shit*—it was all she could think as panic made her heart race and she screamed again. “Jackson!”

Somewhere down the hall, Jackson’s strangled voice called out her name.

His voice cut off abruptly as a shiver claimed her, the same feeling she’d had in Memphis that had prompted her to abandon her car. Something bad was coming. Something dangerous. Her instincts screamed it, and now she knew them for what they were. Some bit of supernatural heritage, telling her the only way to save herself. *Run, run, run.*

But she couldn’t run, not with Mahalia on the floor, bleeding. Not with Jackson somewhere in the house, hurt or injured or under some kind of magical attack.

Steven. She needed Steven—someone who knew what was going on, who might still be close enough to help. She held her shirt to Mahalia’s head with one hand while she groped on the counter with the other, finally finding Mahalia’s cell phone. She fumbled and flipped open the phone, her hand shaking so badly she could barely read the display.

Fear for Jackson intruded again, and something feral inside screamed for her to abandon Mahalia and find Jackson, to curl around him and protect him. But, whatever had happened, Jackson would never forgive her for letting his mentor bleed to death on the floor.

And there was probably nothing she could do anyway.

Nothing but get help. Mackenzie took a deep breath and let it out before focusing on the phone again. “Steven,” she whispered as she found the address book. “Steven.”

The phone flew from her hand, skittering across the floor until it bumped into a polished black shoe. Her gaze jerked upward, and she found herself staring into a pair of ice blue eyes surrounded by wrinkles. She took in the man’s snowy white hair and neat suit.

Charles.

It had to be. The knowledge must have shown on her face, because he smiled and nodded. “Hello, Jessica. I see they’ve told you about me. That’s a shame, since I’m sure it was nothing flattering.”

She said the only thing she could think of, the only thing she could manage. “My name isn’t Jessica.”

Charles nodded. “Mackenzie, then. Marcus, please check on Ms. Tate and make sure she isn’t badly injured.”

“Sure, Dad.” Marcus moved around him and knelt next to Mackenzie. “Can I see?” He indicated the shirt she held to Mahalia’s head.

The entire situation was so surreal that she obeyed, pulling the shirt away before she remembered it was Marcus next to her, the man who had chased her across the country and destroyed her life. The man who thought they were destined to be lovers and have magical children.

The worst part was that the same voice that had told her to run was quiet now. Peaceful, as if maybe Marcus wasn't wrong about their destiny and belonging together. The feeling made no sense, felt more animal than human, and she fought it with the memory of Jackson smiling at her, of the way her body thrilled when he touched her. *That's real, Mackenzie.*

Marcus took the bloodied shirt from her and blotted at the cut just above Mahalia's brow. "It looks bad. She needs help."

Charles stepped close and bent down, brushing his fingers lightly along the top of Mahalia's head. Mackenzie felt the prickling feeling again, like pins and needles from sitting still too long. A warm, tangible pressure grew slowly until Charles murmured a few words under his breath.

When he stood again, the cut on Mahalia's forehead was gone. Mackenzie stared blankly before taking the shirt from Marcus and wiping the blood away. Underneath was smooth, unblemished skin, without even a faint scar to show the injury had ever been there.

"We don't mean anyone harm, Mackenzie," Charles told her quietly. "We will do violence if we must, to keep our kind from dying, but we don't *want* to. Now if you'll just—"

"What about Jackson? What did you do to *him*?"

Charles glanced at Marcus. "Jackson?"

"The spell caster who was helping her."

“Ah.” Charles focused on Mackenzie again. “If he’s in the house, he was probably rendered unconscious by the backlash of Ms. Tate’s wards falling. I’m sure it will cause him no permanent damage. If you come with us now, we’ll explain everything.”

“No,” she whispered, her shaking fingers feeling at Mahalia’s neck for a pulse. It was there, weak but steady. “No. I’m not leaving them.”

Charles smiled gently at her, and it was more terrifying than if he’d been angry or cold. “Mackenzie, I’m afraid I can’t give you a choice. If you don’t come with us now, Marcus will bring you.”

She considered fighting. Swinging out, hitting them with something, trying to escape. But she could remember the implied threat under Charles’s words. He didn’t *want* to hurt anyone...but he would. If she tried to escape, she would be leaving Mahalia and Jackson at his mercy. Two perfect hostages.

She shook her head again and wrapped her hand around Mahalia’s. “I can’t leave her like this. I’m not going to come with you and leave her on the floor, and I’m not going anywhere until I check on Jackson.”

“He’s fine, Mackenzie. I can sense his magic. But you do have a point about leaving them here... Marcus, retrieve her cellular phone, please. We’ll call my nephew once we’re on

our way so Mackenzie won't need to worry herself with Ms. Tate and Mr. Holt's well-being."

"Holt is an investigator," Marcus reminded him, though already moving to obey. "They'll be able to track the GPS chip in the phone."

"Ah, yes. Sometimes I fall behind the times, though it hardly matters. Steven knows how to find us, for all the good it will do him." Charles held out a hand, his steady gaze still on Mackenzie. "Now, my dear. Are you going to walk with us, or must Marcus carry you?"

Mackenzie wasn't sure she could have stood even if she'd wanted to. She was frozen to the spot, so terrified she could barely think. She could only shake her head again.

Charles sighed. "Marcus? Be gentle with her."

He lifted her as if she weighed nothing, shifting her just enough to tuck her face into his neck. It was a surprisingly trusting gesture, since she could have easily sank her teeth into the tender flesh there. "It'll be all right, Mackenzie," he whispered. "You'll feel better once we get home."

"No—" It was too much. Frantic, she began to struggle, forgetting all about Mahalia and Jackson and the reasons she was trapped. The instinctive urge to curl against Marcus made it worse, turning her panic to mindless terror as she shoved at his chest and kicked at him, managing to knock her heel into

his hip. “No!” The word came out as a snarl this time, and she *did* dig her teeth into his neck as she kicked again.

He barely reacted to the bite, just hissed softly and tightened his arms around her. “He can make you sleep. Even make you catatonic.” He pulled her head back and looked at her, his expression soft and pleading. “He won’t like it, but he will.”

Mackenzie spat in his face and redoubled her struggles.

“Enough.” Charles stepped over Mahalia as if she weren’t even there. Mackenzie felt his hand on her forehead and tried to jerk away, but Marcus held her steady.

With Jackson it had been a slow, easy feeling, a gentle drifting into sleep, as if she’d simply grown tired. Charles was far more powerful—or far less careful. She was still struggling frantically, her heart pounding in terror, when the world went black.

Chapter Thirteen

Jackson swam his way up through the darkness for what felt like forever. He spent far too long in the shadows between unconsciousness and waking, knowing he needed to open his eyes and move, because there was something...

Mackenzie.

His head pounded, even as he dragged himself to his feet and stumbled down the hall. Steven burst through the back door and into the kitchen just as Jackson caught himself on the edge of the doorframe. “Shit. Fuck.”

Mahalia lay on the floor, her car keys mere inches from her open hand. Though there was an alarming amount of blood on the floor, including a copious amount soaked into the shirt he recognized as Mackenzie’s, there was no evidence of a wound anywhere on his mentor’s body.

Mackenzie was gone. “They came here. They took her.”

“He called me. My uncle.” Steven dropped to his knees and gathered Mahalia into his arms. “We should put her on the bed.”

Jackson's jaw dropped. "No, you should get her to a hospital while I look for Talbot."

"No," Steven snapped. "You don't need to look for him. I know where he's going, and it's suicide to go there by yourself."

"We can't just sit here. Mahalia needs a doctor, and I need—" *I need to find Mackenzie before Talbot decides she's too much trouble.*

Mahalia stirred in Steven's arms. "Charles."

"May." Steven touched her cheek. "It's Steven and Jack. Are you all right?"

She opened her eyes and struggled, pushing against Steven's chest. "Where is she? Is she gone?"

"Shh, May—" Steven helped her sit. "The Peytons and Jackson's partner will be here by the end of the day, with any luck. We'll get her back."

Her reddened eyes welled with tears. "No. Not again, Steven. I did it *again*..." She pressed her face against his neck and began to sob.

"No." Steven's expression was pained as he cradled Mahalia against his chest. "It was too much to ask of you. Too much to ask of anyone. I'm sorry, May."

Jackson started to reach out, but stopped and averted his eyes. Steven was far better suited to the task of comforting

Mahalia than he was. “You said you knew where he was taking her.”

“Charles owns land in Coos County, New Hampshire, near the Vermont border. It’s remote, wrapped in protective spells, and he’s untouchable when he’s there.” Steven’s sudden smile was vicious. “Unless you’re his nephew and have a Seer with you. For once, the fact that we’re related just may do some good.”

Jackson felt equally vicious as he stared at the pool of blood on the floor, Mackenzie’s shirt in the middle of it. “If you and Nick’s sister can get me and Alec within a hundred yards of him, we’ll do the rest.”

Steven opened his mouth, obviously intending to give him another warning on how dangerous Charles was. Instead, he nodded shortly as he rose, Mahalia still held against his chest. “I’m going to get her cleaned up and settled down. We’ll talk about it when we’re all together.”

Jackson stared after them. His mind whirled as he picked up Mackenzie’s shirt, dropped it into the sink and turned the water on. It was one of the hardest things he’d ever done, but he pushed every thought he could from his mind as he located a dish towel, dampened it, and started cleaning the kitchen floor.

Mahalia glanced at Jackson's hand on her elbow as they walked across the tarmac to the waiting jet. "I'm fine, Jack. You don't have to treat me like an old lady."

"I'm treating you like a lady who got her head whacked to hell and back a couple of hours ago." He eyed the jet with a whistle. "Must be nice to own half of New York."

"I doubt this is Peyton's. Probably just one of hundreds he has at his ready disposal." Mahalia smiled a little. "Have Nick and Alec made it in yet?"

"They should be waiting for us."

Alec and Nick were, indeed, waiting inside the jet. Both were seated in luxurious seats on opposite sides of the plane, and Alec sported a prominent black eye.

Jackson's eyebrows shot up. "What the hell happened to you?"

Alec slanted a look at Nick. "Little friendly disagreement."

The look Nick shot him in return could have set his hair aflame. "And if you ever lump my sister in with the likes of Charles Talbot again, I'll blacken more than your eye, you ridiculous, ignorant *bastard*."

"I wasn't—" Alec snapped his mouth shut and turned to Jackson. "She's your best friend. Calm her down, would you?"

“I’m fine,” Nick told Jackson as he moved to sit next to her.

She wasn’t fine. Her body vibrated with tension, and the knuckles of her right hand were swollen and bruised. “What happened?”

She didn’t answer at first. Instead, she dragged a ponytail holder from her purse and used it to secure her hair in a careless knot at the back of her head. “You’d think that Alec, of all people, would know better than to simply regurgitate some tired old ultraconservative shit, wouldn’t you?”

As soon as the words were out of Nick’s mouth, Jackson groaned. She was almost rabidly protective of Michelle, but backhanded references to the painful events of Alec’s life would only make things worse.

“Watch your mouth, Peyton,” Alec said, his voice cold. “You don’t know—”

“Enough.” Steven’s quiet voice overpowered Alec’s easily. “We’re already in over our heads. Perhaps we could stop jabbing at each other?” His eyes cut to Alec. “And let’s remember that, regardless of our personal feelings, Michelle Peyton is the only hope any of us have of facing down Charles Talbot and surviving.”

Alec wasn’t one to back down to anyone, but the sheer intensity in Steven’s eyes seemed to give his partner pause. “Fine.”

Jackson turned to Nick and raised an eyebrow, waiting for her to apologize. She exhaled and looked away. “I’m sorry, Alec. I shouldn’t have said that.” Then she mirrored Jackson’s expression and added, “But if anyone so much as hints that my sister is crazy, there’s going to be an ass-kicking after this is all taken care of.”

Mahalia sat next to Alec and patted his leg. “Don’t worry. I don’t even think she *could* kick your ass. Must have just...” She waved a hand at his face. “Well, she must have caught you off guard, that’s all.”

Alec snorted. “That girl’s damn scrappy for someone who doesn’t even come up to my shoulder.”

Jackson slid an arm around Nick and tugged her to his side. “We’re going to meet your dad and sister in New York?”

She nodded. “I just talked to Michelle. She’s pretty busy getting ready, so we’ll pick them up on our way.”

“All right.” The better prepared Michelle was to face Talbot, the more likely they’d get through this confrontation in one piece. “Steven, is there anything else we can figure out or plan right now?”

Steven shook his head. “Let’s get to New York.”

Chapter Fourteen

The world came into focus with terrifying slowness. Mackenzie fought her way out of sleep, vaguely remembering she was supposed to be scared but not why.

Then she opened her eyes and saw Marcus, and everything came flooding back. She bolted upright on the bed, her eyes darting around the small bedroom. It was plain but tastefully decorated, with a desk, a bookshelf and an open door that led into an adjoining bathroom. The door to the hallway was open, meaning no one cared if she ran. *Probably because they could stop me before I got more than twenty feet*, she thought in annoyance, remembering how easily Marcus had restrained her.

She returned her gaze to Marcus. He'd been reading a book, though he closed it now as he smiled at her. "Feeling better?"

"No," she retorted, annoyed by his dogged friendliness. She could see the marks her teeth had left on his neck, yet he seemed completely unbothered by the fact that she'd hurt him.

He shrugged and reopened his book. “Maybe you need more sleep.”

It was infuriating. “Sleep is supposed to make me feel better about being *kidnapped*?”

He kept his eyes on the pages of the book, though he raised a brow. “Is screaming going to make you feel better?”

“Kicking you some more might make me feel better.” Maybe then he’d show a reaction other than a casual lack of concern.

“You’re welcome to scream *or* kick me again, whichever you prefer.” He tilted his head and flashed her a charming grin. “I’m not all that bad. You’ll see.”

He had a dangerous charisma, the kind that made it hard for Mackenzie to remember he was a fanatic. She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and pressed her feet to the cool hardwood floor. “You could be the greatest guy in the world, and it wouldn’t make up for the fact that you’ve hurt people to get to me. I’m a prisoner here.”

Marcus actually looked remorseful. “I really wish it hadn’t had to happen,” he told her quietly, laying the book on the bedside table. “If I’d been able to make you understand your importance, your role, none of it would have been necessary.”

“My role.” The words came out flat. “You mean to have your...infectious babies.”

He threw back his head and laughed, the action stretching out the strong column of his throat. “You make them sound like one of the ten plagues of Egypt, Mackenzie. They’ll just be babies. Babies with an amazing gift.”

“And if I don’t want babies?” *Or if I don’t want them to be yours?*

His brows drew together. “Why wouldn’t you?”

The fact that he actually seemed to care about her answer made her pause. Marcus was a fanatic and a shapeshifter and who knew what else but, in the end, he was a person too. A man. If there was one thing she’d always been good at...

Instead of snapping out another angry retort, she paused to consider the answer. “I had a life. I went to college to study dance. I was working at something I loved, teaching lessons, making connections. You obviously know what it’s like to have a dream. Mine was dancing.”

“How am I standing in the way of that?” he asked slowly. “I don’t understand. I mean, I can help you.”

“When am I supposed to start having these children?” she asked quietly. “How much dancing can I do if I’m supposed to be pregnant all the time?”

Marcus wasn’t laughing anymore. He looked angry. “You think I’d want that?” He rose to his feet. “You’re not meant to be an incubator, Mackenzie. You’re meant to be my wife.”

She forgot about her plans to charm him. “You chased me through four states, made me terrified for my life, nearly killed an old woman and *kidnapped* me, and you’re mad that I’m confused about your motivations?”

“I told you exactly what my motivations were when we first met.”

“And I told you I wasn’t interested,” she snarled. “You took the choice from me. So as long as I have no choice in the matter, you have no right to be all high and mighty with me.”

He advanced on her until they were standing toe-to-toe. “You think I have a choice?” he whispered. “You think I wouldn’t rather strike out on my own and meet a woman who’s a little more suited to me than you? Well, I would, actually, but I can’t. Because this is important, Mackenzie. Without us doing what we’re supposed to do, our race is going to die. No more cougars. Don’t you *get* that?”

“No!” She took a step back, bumped into the bed and sat abruptly. She clenched her hands around the blanket, her voice dropping to a whisper as well. “I don’t belong to your *race*. Half the time, I still think I hit my head and have lost my damn mind, Marcus!”

His shoulders relaxed. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled at you. Sometimes I forget you grew up hearing nothing of our destiny. It’s hard for me to fathom, really.” He sat in his chair again. “As for thinking you’re crazy, that will sort itself out

once Dad removes the suppressive spell that's been keeping you from shifting."

There it was again. That word. *Dad*. Marcus apparently had no idea that Charles wasn't his father. She opened her mouth to say as much, but the words died on her tongue. *He isn't going to believe you*, she told herself sternly. It was the only weapon she had, but if she used it too soon it wouldn't work.

Mackenzie closed her eyes and forced herself to relax. Whatever Charles's misdeeds, it was obvious Marcus believed in the cause because he'd been told only what Charles wanted him to know. *Just like my parents. Just like Steven.*

If she wasn't going to blame them for believing Charles, how could she blame the man who had been raised by him? It didn't mean she had to trust Marcus, but it made it easier not to hate him. She had to win him over to her side if she was going to have any chance of escaping.

She needed every advantage she could get.

Mackenzie met Marcus's faintly worried gaze. "I want him to remove the spell," she said, her voice trembling. "I want to learn what—who I am."

And then I'm going to use it to get away.

Marcus came back later that evening with an armful of neatly folded clothing. “I had to guess at the sizes,” he explained as he set the pile on the chair beside the bed. “Once you get dressed, Dad wants to see you.”

“Are we going to break the spell?”

“I think so.” He turned his back to her and waited.

He wasn’t going to leave. Mackenzie stepped out of her bloodied pants and pulled on the clothes as quickly as possible. The trousers were too tight across the hips and several inches too long, but Marcus hadn’t done a terrible job.

“Okay,” she said when she was dressed. “Is this going to hurt? Because when the spell was getting all weird before, it was pretty uncomfortable.”

“It’s potentially dangerous, but Dad can help you through it. He’s very powerful, and he’s dealt with these things before.”

She followed him as he headed left down the hallway. “So...where are we? Or can I not know?”

Marcus shot her a bemused look. “We’re at Dad’s estate in upstate New Hampshire, not in some secret, underground lair.”

It was oddly disappointing. “That’s a little anticlimactic.”

“Sorry. I’ll try to take my role as evil henchman more seriously in the future. Perhaps I’ll take to wearing a

monocle.” He squinted one eye and affected a very proper British accent. “Will that do, Miss Brooks?”

She didn’t want to laugh. She didn’t want to find him funny, or human, or the least bit sympathetic. In a perfect world Marcus would be easy to hate, a perfect cardboard cutout of evil. *Jackson would be my dashing hero...*

At least it would be easy to act as if she was warming to Marcus. She let herself laugh and give him a grudging smile. “I’d grow a mustache if I were you.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Oh, I’m bad at that. It takes me weeks, and I just look sad in the meantime.”

Marcus opened the door at the end of the hall. The room beyond was large, probably the size of Jackson’s entire apartment, though it was long rather than wide. It had been furnished as an office on one end and sitting room on the other, and offered a picturesque view of the forest through the sliding glass door on the wall opposite them.

Charles sat in a chair just outside the door, his back to the pair. “We’ll take care of the spell out here,” he said without turning around. “Come outside, children.”

It took all of Mackenzie’s willpower to follow Marcus through the door. A pillow sat on the ground in front of Charles’s chair, and the older man gestured to it. “Sit, Mackenzie. Marcus, please kneel behind her. It’s possible breaking the spell will disorient her.”

When she didn't move, Marcus slid his hands over her shoulders in a light, reassuring touch. "It's okay," he whispered. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

"Okay." She sat on the pillow, strangely comforted by Marcus's presence behind her, considering the fact that she'd spent the last month living in terror of him.

Charles rested his hands lightly on either side of Mackenzie's head. His skin was warm and dry, and his hands trembled slightly. He drew in a deep breath, and a chill raced down her spine, raising goose bumps on her skin as she shivered.

Charles's hands fell away. "It's done."

Mackenzie stared at him in shock. "What?" After all the buildup, after listening to Jackson and Mahalia discuss the spell and how dangerous it was, it terrified her to realize Charles had found dissolving it no more trying than brushing away a fly. Jackson and Mahalia could do things that seemed miraculous, things she could hardly understand. Charles surpassed them, *eclipsed* them.

It wasn't surprising Charles thought of himself as a god. Fear filled her, honest horror as she realized for the first time just how out of her league she was.

It must have showed on her face. Charles smiled slightly. "It's done. Ms. Tate's attempts to bolster the spell's effects were quite deft, though she lacked the power to truly finish

what she started. Because of the framework she laid, I was able to remove the original spell. Right now I'm holding a temporary spell on you myself."

"Why?"

"Because the minute I let go, you're going to shift forms." Charles's voice was gentle. "You don't want that to happen while you're dressed."

Which meant they expected her to strip naked in front of them.

Behind her, Marcus cleared his throat. "Would it make you feel better if I went first? Shifted, I mean?"

Mackenzie gathered her courage and turned to face him. "Yes. Please."

Marcus nodded and pulled his shirt over his head, revealing a smooth, muscled chest. He reached for his belt as he spoke. "Have you even seen this happen before? I mean, are you going to be all right?"

"Steven showed me yesterday." She averted her eyes. That peculiar yearning was back, the one that came from somewhere deep inside and didn't feel remotely human.

"I see." He shed his shoes and socks, and his cheeks reddened just a bit as he unfastened his pants. "Sorry. The circumstances are—"

"She doesn't have time for this modesty," Charles snapped. His chair scraped over the slate patio. When she

looked over her shoulder, he had risen and turned his back to them. “Take off your clothing, Mackenzie. Please.”

Feeling silly and exposed, Mackenzie waited until Marcus had turned away again before stripping her shirt off and dropping it to the ground. Her pants and undergarments followed, leaving her shivering slightly even in the warm August air.

Marcus glanced at her over his shoulder. “Ready?”

She was terrified. “Is there any way to be ready?”

“No.” It was Charles’s voice, right behind her. She felt his hand brush against the back of her head, and the world tumbled into chaos.

Arousal rose in her suddenly, a thousand times stronger than the lust that had gripped her in the car with Jackson, and she faintly heard Charles say, “Catch her, Marcus.”

Warm arms slid around her. Her entire body stiffened, her back arching painfully. An enormous pressure began to build inside her, slowly, inexorably, each second becoming more and more unbearable.

The scents assaulted her first, Marcus’s soap and aftershave, and underneath that something else, something tantalizing that smelled of musk and cat. She could smell the flowers, the freshly cut grass, the needles on the pines rising in front of them.

Then the sounds came and Mackenzie cried out, clamping her hands over her ears as the volume of the entire world kicked up several notches. Marcus's heart beat strongly, and his breathing rasped so loudly her ears hurt. She could hear Charles's heart pound too, even though he stood several feet away. The gentle breeze fluttering the leaves on the trees sounded like a screaming wind.

Mackenzie shuddered against Marcus, overwhelmed by the onslaught of sensation, and he lowered them both to the grass. The desire faded, replaced by a hunger which in turn faded to predatory rage. Charles's rapid heartbeat spoke of fear or excitement, and she wanted to turn on him, to stalk him.

She started to pull away from Marcus to do just that when another spasm shook her and the intense pressure inside her twisted into excruciating pain. The world around her shimmered, turned dark, and she took a breath to scream—

But something inside her broke and she collapsed to the ground, too confused by the sudden peace to wonder why Marcus had let go. She closed her eyes and took slow, steady breaths as she listened to the sounds around her with her cheek pressed against the grass.

Instincts that had been repressed for a lifetime roused slowly, and Mackenzie knew it had happened. When she

opened her eyes, she wouldn't be looking at the world as a human, but as a cougar.

It should have been terrifying.

It wasn't.

Marcus knelt next to her. His gaze met hers but he didn't speak. Instead he underwent the same shimmering transformation Steven had in Mahalia's backyard. He didn't approach, just crouched into a sitting position and watched her carefully.

With her mind still human, still her own, Mackenzie thought it would be difficult to physically adjust to the change. She rose to her feet slowly, expecting awkwardness, and was pleasantly surprised to find that her new body felt like the most natural thing in the world. She stretched her legs slowly, feeling the power in her muscles, and turned to look at Charles.

He watched her, his eyes alight with satisfaction. He came a step closer and a snarl rumbled out of her, an instinctive reaction she couldn't control...and didn't want to. She braced her hind feet against the grass and crouched, preparing herself to pounce on him.

She didn't get the chance. Marcus nipped her flank and bumped his shoulder against hers, throwing her off-balance. He made a noise that sounded like a cross between a hiss and a

whistle, and Mackenzie was surprised to realize she knew exactly what he meant.

No.

He was warning her away from Charles.

Charles took the question of whether she'd heed the warning away from her when he stepped back inside and closed the door quietly. Deprived of the object of her anger, Mackenzie turned again and studied the back yard from her new perspective.

The neatly kept lawn extended twenty feet behind the house before giving way to a hundred yards of wild meadow that led to the forest beyond. The sudden urge to explore gripped her. She needed to run, like she had in her dreams. She gave Marcus an expectant look.

This time, he made a chuckling sound and bounded across the grass in what seemed like an instant. When he dove through the unkempt grasses of the meadow, Mackenzie followed, forgetting about everything except how good it felt to run.

Chapter Fifteen

Jackson tapped his foot on the carpeted floor of John Peyton's jet and sighed. They'd already switched planes, and had been assured the chairman and the Seer would be joining them shortly.

Nick sat next to him, the thin wires of a pair of earphones trailing to the MP3 player in her lap. Her eyes were closed, and she seemed oblivious to his fidgeting until her hand shot out with preternatural speed and clamped on his knee. "Jackson, if you don't tone down the nervous energy, I will be forced to kill you. And I like you." She cracked open an eye and peered at him. "So don't make me do it."

He met her warning with a disgusted groan. "What the hell is taking so long?"

She tugged the wires free and wrapped them around her music player. "Michelle isn't allowed to leave the house until the last possible moment."

"The last p..." Jackson gritted his teeth. "Your father and sister should have been waiting on this damned plane so we could leave as soon as we landed."

Nick raised an eyebrow. “Preaching to the converted, Jackson. Save it for the Conclave’s complaint box, huh?”

Before he could respond, the small door at the front of the jet opened. The man who came through first was imposing, probably several inches taller than Jackson’s own respectable height and a good deal wider through the shoulders. His eyes flickered over the cabin, taking in everyone and everything inside it, and he stepped to one side of the wide center aisle. He exuded a menacing presence that rivaled Alec on a bad day.

When she came through the door next, Nick’s sister looked almost childlike in comparison. Physically, she and Nick were almost identical, but Michelle was dressed in a pristine white blouse and modest black skirt, with her hair gathered in a perfect knot at the back of her head. Jackson couldn’t imagine Nick being caught dead in anything like it.

Michelle stepped down the aisle, and Jackson got a taste of the carefully controlled power radiating from her as an almost tangible heat. He’d met some powerful people in his day, some of them downright scary, but none had felt this strong. Being within ten feet of Michelle felt like standing too close to a live wire.

It made his skin crawl.

Nick shot out of her seat. “Micky!” She pushed past the tall man, whom Jackson assumed was Michelle’s bodyguard, and threw her arms around her sister.

Michelle’s brilliant smile lit her face. Alec fidgeted uncomfortably as the sisters embraced, but, when Jackson followed Alec’s gaze, he found himself looking past Michelle to the man who had boarded the plane after her.

John Wesley Peyton was taller than Jackson had imagined, and even more intimidating than the bodyguard. His glanced around, his sharp eyes taking in everything in the jet’s cabin, and he smoothed his silvered hair with one hand, a gesture that jarred Jackson, since he’d seen Nick do it hundreds of times.

It was a shocking reminder that, though she lived like a bohemian in the French Quarter, Nick had grown up in this world of private jets and business executives built like professional wrestlers. He watched as she stepped past Michelle to hug her father. She barely reached his shoulder and was dwarfed by his bulk. Peyton may have been trying to move the wolves away from using physical challenges to settle disagreements, but it obviously wasn’t because he couldn’t win them. The man was huge.

John released Nick and smiled at Alec. “Alexander. Nice to see you again.”

“John.” Alec’s voice had lost its usual lazy, aggressive edge. Though Jackson wouldn’t have called his partner’s demeanor submissive, it was close to wary. Alec faced the world with a domineering confidence that set most people’s teeth on edge, and seeing him defer to someone felt surreal.

The Alpha’s gaze fell on Jackson, and the politician’s smile returned. “You must be Holt.” He offered his hand. “I heard your father might come out of retirement to run for one of the Senate seats down in Georgia next year. Is that true?”

Jackson rose and shook his hand firmly. “Not sure if Mama will let him, sir. But he’s thinking about it.”

“Excellent. Have you met Michelle?”

Michelle smiled shyly as she offered her hand. “We haven’t met, but I’ve heard so much about you. I’m glad there’s someone keeping my sister out of trouble in New Orleans.”

He was barely able to reach out his own hand in return. The power wafting off Michelle was intense, almost overwhelming, and his stomach churned as he fought not to recoil from her. Instead, he grasped her hand and managed a smile. “Nicky usually just finds enough trouble for both of us.”

He felt a brief surge of power before Michelle’s eyes widened, and she pulled her hand away, a guilty flush staining her cheeks. “I’m sorry, Jackson. I forgot—” The aura of magic

around her disappeared in an instant, which unnerved Jackson more than its presence had. “I’m sorry.” Resigned loneliness clouded her eyes.

He swallowed hard and shook his head. “Nothing to be sorry about.”

Nick touched Jackson’s arm as John disappeared into the cockpit. “Daddy’s going to speak to his pilot and get us underway. Come on, Micky. We’ll sit toward the back. I need to talk to you.”

Michelle followed Nick, with the bodyguard hard on their heels like a gigantic shadow. When they’d walked past, Alec rose and moved into the seat next to Jackson’s. “You okay?”

Jackson tried to speak, but sank to his seat instead. He closed his eyes and breathed heavily as he tried to conquer the waves of nausea roiling through him.

“He’ll be okay.” It was Mahalia’s voice, soft and sure.

Thick paper pressed into his hand. He looked into Mahalia’s sympathetic eyes and down at the airsickness bag she’d given him. “I’m not going to puke, May. I just need a minute.”

“Shit.” Alec shot them both a concerned look. “Is that gonna happen every time they accidentally bump into each other?”

“No.” Mahalia clucked her tongue. “Poor thing forgot to turn it off before she touched him. But you didn’t want to be rude, did you, Jack?”

He gave her a wan smile. “My mama raised me better than that.”

Alec glanced over his shoulder toward the back of the plane. “It’s pretty jarring. She’s tiny...and packs a hell of a punch.”

“I can’t believe you let a five-foot-nothing girl kick your ass. At least Michelle hit me with magic.”

“She caught me off guard,” his partner protested. “She’s fucking fast, that girl is.”

“Both of you, hush, now.” Mahalia made a face. “I’m not listening to this all the way to New Hampshire.”

Jackson flashed her a crooked grin. “How about halfway?”

John came back through the door from the cockpit. “Everybody strap in. We’ll be in the air soon.”

Jackson saw firsthand what exorbitant amounts of money could accomplish. When the jet touched down in New Hampshire, two cars waited for them on the private airstrip, both black SUVs with tinted windows and stone-faced drivers.

“John’s secured a rental property for us about two hours from where Charles’s wards begin,” Steven told Jackson as they carried their sparse belongings from the jet to the second SUV. Michelle’s bodyguard was already packing the Peytons’ small carry-on bags into the back of the first vehicle, and Michelle and Nick sat inside. “We don’t want to get any closer than that until we’ve got our protections in place.”

“How long is that going to take?” The words were terse, but Jackson couldn’t help it. God knew what Talbot and his crew were putting Mackenzie through. “The sooner the better, and all, Steven.”

Steven held open the door for Mahalia. “A couple days at most. I realize it’s hard to hear, Jackson, but Mackenzie is going to be fine. If Charles thinks there’s any way he can talk her into doing this willingly, he’ll take the time to try.”

He felt his jaw tighten as he gritted his teeth. “And if he can’t?”

“It’s not going to come to that.” Steven’s voice was firm. “It’s not, Jackson. I’m going to take care of him this time, once and for all.”

Mahalia cleared her throat as she settled onto the seat. “This isn’t about you, Steven,” she reminded him gently. “Don’t forget that.”

Jackson climbed into the backseat beside Alec. “Have you gotten in touch with Kat yet about the security installation records?”

“She told me she’d call me back.” Alec closed his phone. “I got the impression she was going to be doing some of the less legal sorts of digging around, since she couldn’t find anything through the normal methods. I called Derek Gabriel too. Told him some nasty stuff was going down and that he should keep an eye on Kat. Last thing we need is someone snatching her to fuck with us.”

“I doubt that was necessary.” Talbot already had what he wanted, and the very fact that he’d not only spared Mahalia but called Steven, as well, told him everything he needed to know about the kind of threat the Seer felt they posed. “I don’t think Talbot is worried enough about us to bother.”

His words made Alec shake his head. “Jesus. Either we’re in serious, *serious* shit, or he’s gone off the deep end.”

Jackson tried to find the right words to explain the situation to Alec. “Michelle almost made me puke by shaking my hand. Now imagine if she was fifty years older and trying to hurt me.”

“I don’t care how powerful you are,” Alec said stubbornly. “The minute you start thinking you’re invincible is the minute you lose.”

“Let’s hope you’re right.” He couldn’t afford to let Charles Talbot intimidate him, not if he wanted to be useful when it came to making sure Mackenzie was safe. “Of course, you’re right.”

“Damn straight. He’s going to make mistakes, and we’ve got the Peytons and their Seer and their private jet. One wrong move and we’ll be ready to take him down.”

“Yeah. We will.”

Mahalia turned and raised an eyebrow as she glanced between them. “Y’all are making me nervous.”

Alec smiled ruefully. “Sorry, Mahalia.”

Jackson leaned forward. “How far is it to the—what? House? Apartment?”

“House.” Steven didn’t look up from the map he studied. “Maybe an hour’s drive. This was the nearest public airstrip to Charles’s estate.”

Jackson tugged a small notebook and pen out of his jacket pocket. “Okay. Let me know if you need anything from me.” He sat back and started sketching out a small grid. Even the simple act of sectioning the paper calmed him.

“Approaches and outcomes?” Alec asked quietly, nodding to the notebook. “Need some help?”

“No.” He continued to turn the simply lined paper into a complex grid. “It won’t do much good, really, until we get some intel. I just have to do *something*.”

“Yeah.”

Jackson’s cell phone vibrated in his pocket and he fumbled it out, his eyes drawn to the display. His shoulders slumped as he answered it. “Did you find anything, Kat?”

“No records on legit contractors going out to install security systems,” Kat apologized. “But I figured that the chance it would be an on-the-books thing was pretty slim, so I called Mari. She’s got a friend up in Boston who installs security measures with a magical kick, and she thinks he can find out for sure, one way or another.”

“Mari? I didn’t know she was into security stuff.”

“Yeah. She wants to do that when she graduates. Security systems, I mean. With a magical kick.” Kat spoke nervously. “Am I in danger, Jackson? Alec got Derek pretty riled up. He’s coming to pick me up and he’s not letting me be by myself until you guys get back.”

Jackson made a face at his partner before answering. “No, Kat, you’re not in danger. But you can never be too careful, and with neither of us there, we wanted to make sure someone was keeping an eye on you. Just go with it, okay?”

Kat sighed heavily, her annoyance clear even through the phone. “Fine. But tell Alec I’m kicking his ass when he gets back here. Derek’s probably going to make me go to work with him tomorrow.”

“If you get tired of being cooped up there, have your cousin take you out to one of the construction sites.”

“He won’t do that anymore. He says I’m too friendly to random construction workers, which is totally not true. But I’ve got homework for my grad class anyway, so I’m stuck in his damn office all day.”

Like spending a day staring at Derek’s partner would be a terrible hardship for her. “Yeah, sure. You’ll never recover from the trauma. Tell Callaghan we said hi, and give him a big hug for us too, all right?”

“Oh, shut up.” Kat’s crush on Derek’s partner was only slightly less obvious than Nick’s thing for Derek, but Kat lived under the delusion she’d successfully hidden it from the world at large.

“I’ll give Alec your message. Call us back when you hear from Mari.” He hung up and grinned at the man beside him. “Kat’s going to beat you senseless. I should have told her she’d have to stand in line behind teeny little Nick Peyton.”

Alec just snorted. “Maybe they can start a club.”

“She’ll get over it, especially if she gets to make out with Callaghan tomorrow.” Jackson tapped his pen against his chin and stared at the notebook in front of him. “We’ll need all the official stuff we can get our hands on. Property records, blueprints. Satellite imagery would be a plus.”

“Hmm. Kat pulled the public records, but I’m not sure if she could get blueprints.” He nodded toward the vehicle in front of them. “Peyton can get anything.”

“I’ll call Nick.” Jackson leaned forward and laid a hand on Mahalia’s shoulder. “How about Talbot’s magical defenses?”

“They’re formidable.” It was Steven who answered, his voice quiet. “Formidable enough that there might not *be* any other defenses. People who work for him have talismans that allow them to cross the wards.”

Jackson looked at Mahalia. “So it’ll be mostly you and Michelle, but I can help.”

She patted his hand. “We’ll be counting on you, Jack.”

He sat back, sighing as he once again retrieved his phone. “Hopefully, Peyton can come through with the intel.” The chances he couldn’t were slim to none, but Jackson’s monthly quota of optimism had already been exhausted. “We’ll make it. We have to.”

Tired as she was, Mackenzie snapped awake when she heard the quiet click of the door. The soft blankets beneath her were disorienting, especially since the last thing she remembered was running through the woods with Marcus.

Her eyes flew open, and she recognized the room she’d woken up in that afternoon. The door was barely ajar, but she

could hear someone breathing on the other side, could even hear a heartbeat if she listened hard enough.

That knowledge made *her* heart pound. She instinctively scurried back on the bed as the door swung open.

Marcus walked in. “I wondered if you’d be up yet. You were worn out.”

Something inside her relaxed, though she didn’t lower her guard completely as she settled on the bed, dragging the sheet up to cover her body. “I don’t remember how I got here.”

“I brought you in.” He pulled the straight-backed chair from the wall and situated himself in it. “You were barely conscious.”

She could tell he’d showered recently, and that his soap carried a faint trace of sandalwood. An odd feeling washed through her. Something about him had changed, something she couldn’t classify as a scent or sound or even a physical sensation. “You...feel different.”

He tilted his head and watched her, his blue eyes clear. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Everything feels different. Sounds different.” She shivered and pulled the sheet higher, though she felt exposed in a way that had nothing to do with her lack of clothing. If she could count his heartbeats and almost *taste* his faint confusion, she could only imagine how much easier it was for him to tell exactly what she felt.

“Ah.” Mackenzie saw the sudden comprehension that flooded him. “The magic. You must be experiencing some lingering effects. Don’t worry; it’ll fade, and you’ll be back to normal. Well,” he amended quickly, “normal for you, anyway.”

“I don’t even know what normal is. I can hear your *heartbeat*, Marcus. How is that remotely normal?”

The confusion was back. “You can’t usually?” He bit his lip thoughtfully when she shook her head. “I’ve never heard of it being done, but perhaps the spell that kept you from shifting also suppressed your sensory function.”

Mackenzie squeezed her eyes shut. “You mean it’s always going to be like this?”

“Maybe not,” he offered sympathetically. “You probably do have a bit of a hangover, which will fade, but... Yes. Your senses are going to be much sharper than an average person’s.” He hesitated. “Are you hungry?”

She was starving. “Yeah. Do I wait here for someone to bring something?”

Marcus stood. “God, no. I thought we’d eat in the dining room, if that sounds okay.” He indicated the closet across from the bed. “There should be more clothing in there. You can find something appropriate, but I thought you might like a shower first.”

“Oh.” So she wasn’t going to be treated like a prisoner. Perhaps they thought she was warming to them, or they were sure she couldn’t escape. Either way, it would be stupid to attempt to flee while she was starving and exhausted. *And before I know what I’m up against.* “That sounds nice, actually. Thanks.”

“Sure. Bathroom’s across the hall, and I’ll be in the study. Toward the stairs and to the left.” He disappeared.

Chapter Sixteen

The cabin John Peyton had secured for them turned out to be a trio of cabins, each appointed with all of the best amenities. Although their entire group would have fit comfortably into one, John had reserved all three to ensure privacy.

After an hour spent canvassing their various contacts, everyone convened in the cabin the Peytons had claimed for their use. The large, sturdy table was heaped with printouts and faxes, and it looked suspiciously like Steven, Mahalia and Michelle had been mapping out Charles's magical defenses on the pristine white tablecloth.

Jackson dropped a sheaf of aerial photographs on one corner of the table and braced a knee on a chair as he studied the expensive, now-defaced cloth. "He has three separate wards around the property?"

Michelle answered, her face drawn into a look of fierce concentration. "Three. The first extends for nearly a half a mile in every direction from his property. Anyone who crosses that line trips the first ward. He can tell by the strength and

flavor of the energy how many intruders there are and what they are.” She chewed absently at her lower lip as she traced her finger along the line. “I assume there has to be a base minimum. With all the animals running around in the woods there he could never keep track of *everything* with an aura...”

“This area is lauded for its hunting,” Jackson noted. “Probably nothing smaller than a deer triggers it...if he’s just going on energy traces. But that’s a big if.”

“Luckily I’m not planning on fooling it by masking our auras. That would only work for the first ward in any case.” Michelle’s finger moved to a second line. “This one extends perhaps a thousand feet in every direction from the house. It’s an actual barrier.” She glanced at Steven, who sat at the end of the table.

“How it affects you depends on how powerful you are,” he said. “A normal human without any special abilities? It would probably just give them the creeps and discourage them from wanting to continue. They’d never know why, just that they didn’t want to keep going.”

Michelle picked up the explanation again. “Someone who knew what it was, or had enough willpower to force his way through would start to feel uncomfortable. It would be the most damaging for someone who had the willpower to keep going but not the magical strength to shield himself from the backlash. It could, quite possibly, hurt.”

Jackson tapped the third and final ring. “So I guess crossing this one would *definitely* hurt.”

“If you could get past it at all,” Michelle confirmed. “Without magical ability it would be impossible. Like hitting an invisible wall. I’ve seen a ward like this once before, though not around something as large as a house, and never permanent. The first two wards won’t be a problem for me, but this one... I can get us *through* it, but I don’t know if I can do so undetected.”

“It might be a moot point if the house has exterior security cameras.” Jackson held up a satellite photo of the house and surrounding grounds. “How close is that third ward to the house?”

“Within ten feet of the exterior walls,” Steven said. “Maybe twenty. He’s spent years building these, channeling energy into them, but that third ward is the hardest to maintain. He can’t push it out any farther.”

“If you can get us that far, Michelle, don’t worry about avoiding detection, not until we find out whether he has some sort of security setup.” He picked up another handful of glossy black-and-white pictures, all featuring Charles’s mansion. “What about the house itself?”

Steven scoffed. “Charles doesn’t even bother to lock his doors. The thought that someone might get that close without him being aware of it is incomprehensible to him, and for

good reason. For decades, he's probably been the most magically powerful person in the country."

"I wasn't talking about deadbolts and chains." Jackson pressed his lips together in a grim line. "Can he keep us out, no matter what kind of magic Michelle uses? That's the real question."

"I don't think so." Michelle bit her lip again. "Mahalia knows how to construct the talismans Charles uses to allow his employees access to the property. It's going to take every scrap of power all three of us have to duplicate them, and we'll need at least a day to recover. If we can do that, though, we can focus all the power we have on getting past him."

"So we're looking at three days, minimum, before we can move on this," Jackson observed, his jaw tight.

"It's the only way," Steven said. "She'll be safe, Jackson. If I weren't completely sure of that I'd go in right now by myself."

Jackson's shoulders relaxed, and he smiled slightly. "That doesn't sound like such a bad plan to me." Anything that would get Mackenzie back faster was all right by him.

Mahalia leaned over to slap one of his hands. "It's the stupidest thing I ever heard, Jackson Holt, and you know it. Now finish looking at your pictures, and let me and Michelle start the talismans. We'll tell you when we need your help."

He rubbed his hand and considered mounting a mutiny, but it didn't seem likely. Even if Alec was willing to go along with it, Peyton would kick him back in line. Support from Nick was equally unlikely for the same reason. "Fine. I'll be out back."

He left everything on the table and stalked toward the back door. It opened onto a small deck overlooking a lake, providing a view he normally would have appreciated.

"Thinking about a dip in the hot tub?" Nick's voice floated from the direction of the driveway.

"Maybe later." He looked over to see her climbing out of one of the SUVs, accompanied by several large men in dark suits. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Grocery run." She shoved two paper sacks at one of the men. "Here, you boys can handle this. I've got an emotional crisis to head off." She jogged toward the porch, quick strides eating distance between them. "They broke the news to you already, huh?"

Jackson tried not to grumble as he leaned against the rough-hewn log railing and stared at the lake. "You mean the part about sitting here with our thumbs up our asses while the crazy man is doing God knows what to Mackenzie? Yeah, we covered it."

"Well..." Nick hopped up to sit on the railing next to him. "We're not exactly going to be splitting our time between co-

ed Twister and bass fishing, Jackson. There's stuff to be done. Stuff for you to do." She gave him a stern look. "This isn't the kind of situation where we can just bust in there, guns blazing, and save the damsel. Not without heavy casualties."

She was right. They were *all* right, but it didn't help the growing sense of unease and dread that made his skin crawl. "I know, Nicky, but God damn it—"

"Yeah." She nudged his leg with her foot. "My sister's good. Strong. With her and Mahalia both, and you helping them..."

"Yeah," he said woodenly. "It'll all work out."

"It *will*," she insisted over the sound of the back door opening again. "We'll do it together."

"I wish I could do it faster." Michelle spoke quietly, her tone apologetic. Nick's sister stood a few feet away, her hulking bodyguard at her back. She'd pulled her hair from its formal knot and exchanged her prim business suit for a flowing silk skirt and blouse that made her seem more approachable. "I'm sorry, Jackson."

Nick shot him a warning look, and he grimaced at her before giving Michelle an encouraging smile. "Look, it takes time. I get it. It can't be helped."

"It's not just that." Michelle leaned on the railing next to Nick. "I know how frustrating it is, waiting for the Conclave

to give me permission to do anything. We've slowed things down."

The two sisters made an odd picture, identical save for the fact that Nick was dressed like a lumberjack in jeans, boots and a thermal henley. Jackson watched as Nick's hand found Michelle's, comforting her without conscious thought. "None of this is your fault, Micky," she said soothingly. "Besides, if Steven's right, going after Mackenzie sooner wouldn't have gotten us anywhere but dead,"

No, Jackson thought morosely. *None of this is Michelle's fault, mostly because it's mine*. "Better listen to your sister, kiddo. She's saved my hide a couple of times, so she must be pretty smart."

"She likes to think she is." Michelle wrinkled her nose at Nick, who made a face in return. "She's bossy as hell too." Michelle's gaze shifted back to the bodyguard and she frowned suddenly. "No one introduced you to Aaron, did they?"

He straightened and held out his hand. "Jackson Holt."

The man accepted his hand, his grip firm but not aggressive. "Aaron Spencer."

"Aaron's been chasing me around for years," Michelle said, a fond smile on her lips. "In the beginning he had to chase both of us. No one warned him what he was getting himself into."

Jackson might have been in over his head when it came to the current situation, but he'd always been good with body language, and he instantly recognized the undercurrents flowing between Michelle and the tall, red-haired man who stepped up beside her. If they weren't involved romantically, he could tell they both wanted to be.

He glanced at Nick, who was merely watching them both with bemusement. "Can't speak to Michelle's behavior, but if you had to watch over this one..." He poked Nick with his elbow and dodged the one she sent his way. "Let's just say I feel your pain, Aaron."

Aaron unbent enough to smile as he stretched one arm out along the railing behind Michelle, his posture protective. "You have no idea. They're both okay one at a time, but together they'll put gray in your hair before thirty."

Nick held up both hands. "Okay, consider the point conceded. Just don't forget that I could whip both of your asses." She tilted her head. "Well, maybe not yours, Aaron. Have you gotten taller?"

"You've definitely gotten shorter. I like the clothes, though. Sort of...park-ranger chic. It suits you."

"Enough." Michelle flashed Jackson a long-suffering look. "They'll go back and forth like this for hours if you let them. My father, Alec and Steven are coordinating plans for a

physical attack, but Mahalia wanted to walk us both through the steps needed to circumvent the wards.”

Nick hopped off the railing, her boots landing on the porch with a *thump*. “I’d better go help the boys, or at least supervise.”

Jackson snorted. “I’ll listen to anything May says if she’s going to be cooking while she says it. I’m starving.”

“Where do you want me to go, Michelle?” Aaron’s voice was quiet as he looked at Michelle. “Want me to stick with you?”

“You’ll feel better if you know what the plan is.” Her fingers brushed his hand, but it looked like a furtive motion, one they tried to hide. “Go on in. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Michelle watched him go, then said, “Don’t say it, Nicky.”

Nick just scuffed the toe of one boot against the planks beneath her feet and leaned close to Michelle, her voice a whisper. “I say more power to you.” She slipped her arms around Michelle’s neck for a quick hug. “Take care of Jackson, and I’ll keep an eye on lover boy.” With a wink, she took off after Aaron.

“You can’t—” Michelle took a deep breath and looked at Jackson. “We’re not involved,” she blurted out, her cheeks flushing slightly. “It’s not allowed. But if anyone was to find

out that we have—that there are feelings... It would be bad. Dangerous, for both of us.”

That sent one of Jackson’s eyebrows up in an arch. “How come?”

“Seers aren’t allowed to have relationships.”

“At all?” He knew his expression must be one of laughable shock, but he couldn’t help it. “Ever?”

“Ever. No emotional or physical intimacy of any kind is allowed.”

Jackson sagged against one of the support beams and tried to wrap his brain around that. “Why?”

“It depends on who you ask.” Michelle leaned her elbows on the railing and picked absently at a piece of flaking paint. “The emotional part is easy. They don’t want me to have divided loyalties.”

The more Jackson heard about the lives of Seers, the worse he felt for Michelle. “How about the rest of it?” he asked gently, staring at her profile.

“Superstition, mostly.” She continued to worry at the chip of paint, her expression distant. “People claim that a Seer who loses her virginity loses her powers. Personally, I think they don’t want me passing on my dirty magical genes by mistake.”

“Your genes are the same as Nick’s,” he noted blandly, “and the entirety of shapeshifter society is waiting with bated

breath for her to make a good match, settle down and have a bunch of babies. What kind of sense does that make?”

Michelle shrugged. “That’s the way it is. I’m an asset to the Conclave if I’m under control. If I thought for a second I’d lose my powers if I had sex, I’d have done it years ago. But it would only serve to put my lover in danger. So...I ignore it.”

He sighed. “Sometimes I wonder if Mackenzie wouldn’t have been better off without any of this shit. I mean, the social stuff. Not only do you have to worry about the same crap as everyone else, but you have to be careful not to reveal yourself or step on the wrong toes, do something wrong... It’s a huge mess sometimes.”

“She’s got Nick to ease her into it.” Michelle smiled at him. “You must have realized by now that the free-spirited party-girl image she’s cultivated so meticulously isn’t all there is to her. Nick knows our society. And Mackenzie will have you, too. She’ll be fine.”

“Yeah. She’ll have both of us. There’s something be said for—” His words cut off as his phone began to ring. “Sorry. Hang on.”

Michelle straightened. “I’ll wait for you in the kitchen.”

It was Kat again. “Did you hear from Mariko?” he answered, eschewing pleasantries as the door swung shut behind Michelle.

“Yep.” Kat’s voice was easy. “Her guy in Boston had actually heard of Talbot. Said the guy’s a legend. There was an informal competition a few years back to see if anyone could get a meeting with him. They wanted his advice on some sort of magical thing—” There was a rustle of paper. “Trip-wire wards, she called them? Anyway, Mari said that no one could even get within a quarter mile of the property, much less score any face time with him. Some of them think he’s not even alive anymore, though I’m guessing you know that’s not true.”

“Unfortunately. Any of Talbot’s humdrum security measures would have to be homegrown. Self-placed cameras with no external monitoring.”

“Mari got the impression from her friend that there wouldn’t even be anything like that. He said if no one can even *get* to your house, cameras are pretty pointless. Of course, she also warned me that he might just be bitter because he was bragging he’d be able to get in and he couldn’t.”

“Duly noted.” Jackson tugged his notebook from his pocket. “Are you at the office now?”

“No.” Her voice was sullen. “I’m at Derek’s desk. He showed up about two minutes after I hung up with you last time.”

“Good. Now, if anything should happen, you take that key we gave you. It opens a safe deposit box at the First Bank and

Trust on Poydras. Number fourteen-twelve. It'll have instructions, and everything else you might need to settle the business, okay?"

"Fuck, Jackson. What the hell is going on?"

He'd never lied to Kat—didn't make a habit of lying to *anyone*, actually—but he hesitated before answering. "This guy, the one who snatched Mackenzie? He's got power, Kat. It's going to take all of us to deal with him and get her back, and that's assuming we all make it out alive."

"Do you need more people? Derek could help, and I'm not useless..." Kat's sounded worried now. "Shit, I can't just sit here and wait."

"No." The last thing he needed was for Kat and her cousin to get hurt when he should have taken care of Talbot in the first place. Nick would kill him for certain. "We've got it under control, as much as possible. You just need to know what to do if things go badly."

"O-okay." She dragged in a shaky breath. "Okay. But if you don't call and keep me updated, I'll track you down and get all up in your business, Jackson Holt."

"Yeah, I know," he said with a slight grin. "Hey, tell your cousin Nick said hi, huh?"

"Only you could go from talking about your damn will to matchmaking, Jackson." Some of the fear had evaporated from her voice. "Unless you want to give me the dirty details

about what you and Mackenzie are going to get up to once you've done your hero shit, keep your nose out of my business. And Nick's too, for that matter."

"Whatever you say, Kat." Jackson headed for the back door, feeling better. "I've got to go. Do me a favor and text me with Mariko's number, all right? I may need to talk to this friend of hers."

"Will do. Don't get killed. I sort of like you."

"Yeah, I bet you say that to all your bosses. Later, kid."

Chapter Seventeen

Mackenzie half-expected to find someone waiting for her when she emerged from the bedroom, freshly scrubbed and dressed in more clothing from the closet. The pants were, again, tight across the hips, and the shirt hadn't been designed for a woman with breasts, but she looked presentable enough. Someone had even stocked the bathroom with things she might need, everything from shampoo and body wash to the clip she'd used to fasten the bulk of her hair at the back of her head.

It was hard to remember she was a kidnapped prisoner as she followed the directions Marcus had given her. Charles was terrifying, but he hadn't done anything overtly threatening, and Marcus—

Marcus had seemed insane when she'd first met him. Absolutely crazy, with his talk of magic and shapeshifters and destiny. It had been a lot easier to dislike him when he'd been nothing more than an obsessed, deranged lunatic.

She reached the stairs and turned left, following the faint sounds she heard from the door she assumed led to the study. “Marcus?”

He sat in one of the wing-backed chairs, reading. He looked up and smiled when she walked in. “Ready for dinner?”

“Yeah.” She managed a faint smile in return. “I’m pretty hungry.”

“Okay.” He offered her his arm, and patted hers as he led her out the door. “I had a table set up in the conservatory. We don’t really grow many things in there, but the view of the stars through the windows and ceiling is breathtaking.”

It wasn’t her shapeshifter instincts that suddenly screeched a warning. The part of her that recognized where the evening was going was purely human—and entirely disturbed. The fact that Marcus didn’t seem like a raving lunatic anymore didn’t mean she was ready to cuddle with him under the stars.

He recognized the look on her face. “Oh, no. It’s not like that. Well, okay, maybe a little. But I’ve toned it down, I swear. Dad wanted to hire a violinist.”

“Yeah.” Mackenzie glanced at him. “I don’t necessarily think you’re trying to hurt me anymore, Marcus, but I’m pretty sure I can’t downshift from kidnapping to moonlight serenades in less than twenty-four hours.”

“Which is why we’re just having dinner.” The look he wore was bland but pleasant. “No talk of destiny or duty or any of that crap. You tell me about your life, and I’ll tell you about mine. Nothing more to it.”

As if it could be that simple. But arguing wouldn’t change anything. “I’ll try.”

Marcus fixed his eyes on the stairs as they descended. “Look, Mackenzie, believe it or not, this really isn’t my idea of the perfect way to meet and woo a woman. Not that you’re not terrific,” he added quickly, “but it’s all a little rushed and fake for my tastes.”

“I spent the last month and a half in a state of blind panic.” Anger crept into her tone, in spite of her determination not to antagonize Marcus. “I barely slept. I lost *everything* I had. You people destroyed my life, and a violinist isn’t going to make me forget that.”

He looked contrite. “I didn’t know that *you* didn’t know. When I came to see you, I mean. I wouldn’t have been so blunt, if I had. As for everything after that... Well, we didn’t have a choice. You’re our last chance, Mackenzie.”

She stopped and pulled her hand away as he descended the final step, leaving her eyes on level with his when he turned to look at her. “I’m your last chance,” she agreed in a quiet voice. “You were willing to go to some crazy lengths to

get a hold of me. So I'm wondering what happens if I don't agree to this. How far are you and your father willing to go?"

Marcus stared at her, his eyes dark. "Considering what you've been through," he said, his voice devoid of emotion, "I'm going to try very hard not to be offended by your implication. But you can rest assured, Mackenzie, I've never touched a woman who didn't want me to do so, and I'm not going to start now."

Guilt stabbed at her, but she pushed it aside with ruthless resolve. "The men you sent after me *killed* people, Marcus. Innocent bystanders. I didn't think you'd be terribly worried about willingness."

The shock that widened his eyes before disappearing behind anger was fleeting but unmistakable. "What are you talking about?"

He doesn't know. Exhilaration rose as quickly as the guilt had, and she shoved it down. If Marcus was truly oblivious to the things Charles had done over the years...

She met his eyes without flinching. "The first one was in Minneapolis. The tall one, Eddie? He had me cornered in the stairwell at my hotel. Two college kids came through the door, and I guess they thought Eddie was mugging me. One of them called the cops and the other one tried to get in between us."

She could see the scene in her memory even now, could hear the slightly drunken slur in the boy's voice. He couldn't

have been older than twenty-one, newly legal and enjoying the hell out of the city's nightlife. The memory of what happened next made her voice shake. "Eddie snapped his neck. Like it was no big deal."

Marcus was shaking his head before she even finished speaking. "You must have been mistaken. Eddie wouldn't have *killed* anyone. That's not what this whole thing is about."

"It happened again in Chicago," she continued, as if he hadn't spoken. "The bouncer at the place I was dancing."

He backed away from her. "Look, maybe Eddie roughed them up, but he didn't kill anyone. That's bullshit."

"Steven told me it's been going on for years." Instinct screamed at her, told her not to press him. If he really had no idea what was going on, she risked pushing him into rejecting what she said out of hand. She tried to pull back, but she couldn't stop the flood of words. "What do you think happened to my parents, Marcus? What do you think happened to *your* parents?"

He paled and took another step, but his eyes went hard. "My parents died in a car accident when I was a child," he said stonily. "Charles Talbot took me in, and he's given me everything. So you might want to watch what you say next."

She'd gone too far. "I'm sorry."

"Sure you are," he scoffed. "Look, if it were up to me, I wouldn't keep you here. But that's damn selfish of me. What

we're supposed to do is more important than what I want, or what you want. But that doesn't mean Dad would let the things you're describing happen. He wouldn't."

She ignored the guilt and the protests of her empty stomach, and dropped her gaze to the floor. "Should I go upstairs?"

His hands clenched into fists at his sides before relaxing. "No. No, of course not." He nodded down a hallway. "The conservatory is that way. Enjoy your dinner." With that, he turned on his heel and stalked off in the opposite direction.

Thanks to her newly sharp senses, Mackenzie heard both voices before she reached the top of the stairs. She recognized the cadence of the first voice as belonging to Marcus, but the second was lower, muffled, and she couldn't place it.

As her steps brought her closer, she realized Marcus was talking to Charles, and the conversation had grown heated. "Why didn't you tell me Eddie and Mason might be—"

Charles cut Marcus off in a low voice. "You should have recognized it as a possibility, Marcus. In a perfect world none of this would have been necessary, but you of all people know what we're fighting for."

"It's *unacceptable*, Dad." Marcus's own voice was low and furious, but rising in volume. "We're trying to save

people, not kill innocent ones who just happen to get in our way.”

“I’ve been alive almost eighty years,” Charles replied shortly. “I’ve watched my kind slowly disappear. How many of us do you think are left? Thirty? Forty? Your children could be the last generation. A few human deaths are nothing compared to the extinction of our entire race.”

“What about *cougar* deaths?” The question was quiet but damning. “What really happened to my parents? To Mackenzie’s parents?”

Mackenzie froze, afraid to move as silence fell in the study. Her heart pounded so loudly she was terrified Charles and Marcus would be able to hear, but no one came to the door as the silence stretched out.

When Charles finally broke it, it was with a harsh curse. “Steven and his lies. The girl doesn’t know better, Marcus, but *you* should. Steven’s had time to fill her head with nonsense. It’s your job to make her understand, not to let her confuse you.”

“But it makes sense,” Marcus protested weakly. “If you’d have Eddie kill people to get to Mackenzie, what else would you do?”

“Nothing is more important to me than the cougars.” Charles’s voice was icy. “*Nothing*. Never forget that.”

It took Marcus a long time to answer. “Okay. Okay, Dad. I’m sorry.”

Mackenzie heard footsteps and scurried back as quietly as possible. When she reached the top of the stairs she cleared her throat and walked—with a good deal more noise—toward her room.

Charles opened the study door, his expression warm and friendly and contrasting starkly with the cold look in his eyes. “Ah, there you are, Mackenzie. I hope you enjoyed your dinner?”

It was the hardest thing in the world to smile at him, and she was sure it looked sickly and terrified. “It was good, thank you. I was just—” She gestured down the hall.

Marcus appeared beside him in the doorway. “I should only be a couple of hours, Dad.” He brushed past Mackenzie without even looking at her.

“Drive carefully,” Charles called pleasantly. “Mackenzie, please allow me to accompany you to your room.”

Fear skittered up Mackenzie’s spine, and she turned without thought. “Marcus, where are you—”

He continued as if he hadn’t heard her, but Charles spoke just behind her, quiet and cold. “He has some errands to run. I can’t go myself, because I can’t trust you not to lie to him in an attempt to secure your own interests. But don’t worry. He’ll return soon.”

She spun to face Charles. Fear made her stumble when she saw the furious expression on his face. “I didn’t lie.” She hated the slight tremble in her voice, but her newly awakened instincts felt nothing but pure, unabated power from Charles, the kind that made her want to find a dim corner and hide.

“Neither did I.” Charles’s words and manner were matter-of-fact. “There is nothing more important to me than the cougars.” At her small start of surprise, he rolled his eyes and leaned closer. “Yes, yes, I could feel you out here, eavesdropping. Tell me. Did you learn anything useful?”

“That you’re a very, very good liar,” she whispered.

Charles merely shrugged and straightened his sweater before beckoning for her to follow him. “Live as long as I have, and you’ll be accomplished at it as well. Tiny fabrications are the cornerstone of our civilization, wouldn’t you agree?”

She followed him. There wasn’t anything else she could do, not when his power wrapped around her with all the smothering weight of a heavy wool blanket. Her legs felt stiff and unsteady from fear as she fell into step next to him, and she shoved her hands into her pockets to hide their shaking. “Since you’re being so honest with me, what’s going to happen to me if I don’t feel up to making babies?”

His glance was shrewd. “Yes, I suppose you would press the issue, wouldn’t you? Very well.” He folded his hands

behind him as he walked. “I don’t need your consent to have your consent. I have several very strong, very competent empaths on retainer. I assure you I would find the entire process distasteful, but... Well, as I have said, there isn’t much I wouldn’t do to see our race survive.”

Mackenzie swallowed and stared straight ahead. “Will Marcus know that he’s raping me, or will you keep that detail from him as well?”

If she’d hoped to shock him, she failed. He didn’t miss a step, and his response was nonchalant. “I see no reason to punish him with the truth, not when he’s merely doing his duty. I never have.”

So Marcus would be Charles’s puppet again, hurting people without realizing it. Hurting *her* without realizing it. “You’re going to destroy him. He loves you. He *trusts* you.”

That stopped him, and he pivoted to stare at her, his expression inscrutable. “Perhaps you didn’t hear me the first time, Miss Evans. The children you and Marcus create will be the culmination of a lifetime’s work, and the continuation of our race.” His eyes flashed with something that might have been pain, but the emotion was gone before Mackenzie could place it. “*That*, my girl, is more important than any fond memories Marcus might have of me when I’m gone.”

For the first time since she’d arrived, her determination wavered. “How many children?” she asked quietly. “How

many children would I need to have for you before I was free to live my own life?"

"As many as possible would be preferable," he said immediately, "but one would suffice. If nothing went wrong."

"Fine." She struggled to keep her voice even. "Can I have a day or two to think about it?"

"Of course," he said with a paternal smile. "Take three, and let me know what you decide. I believe this is the room Marcus chose for you?"

"Yes." It was impossible to smile at him, but she managed to keep her expression neutral as she walked into the room. Every instinct in her body raged against the idea of turning her back on him, but she struggled to suppress them. *Calm. Docile. Subdued.* In all likelihood, Charles already knew she planned to escape, but she couldn't sit and wait for him to strip her of her free will.

"Mackenzie?"

She took a deep breath before turning to face him, her expression as blank as she could make it.

His own face was serene. "I'm only as heartless as I have to be. Remember that." He closed the door behind him, and she could hear his quiet footfalls taking him down the hall, away from her.

Mackenzie rested her forehead against the door as she listened to the hushed sounds of the house around her. She

was almost positive escape would be impossible. Charles was too smart, too determined, to have failed to cover every eventuality. If she was lucky, he'd find her attempt to leave amusing. If she wasn't...

She had no idea what the extent of an empath's powers were, but she had no doubt Charles could find someone to rewrite her feelings, maybe even her entire personality. If he thought she was going to be too much trouble he'd do it tonight, before Marcus even returned.

So I try. And maybe—just maybe—luck would be with her for once.

Chapter Eighteen

Jackson watched a small motorboat make its way across the lake and grumbled under his breath. The place was beautiful, the scenery breathtaking...and he was ready to explode.

The three days since they'd arrived in New Hampshire had been filled with activity. He, Mahalia and Michelle had been focused on pooling their efforts to create the talismans that would allow them access to Talbot's compound, and the shifters had occupied themselves with planning the more mundane details of the assault.

And it *would* be an assault. That was unavoidable. His body hummed with adrenaline at the thought, and he tamped it down. He was getting restless, edgy, and that would do no one any good.

Least of all Mackenzie.

Jackson closed his eyes and slapped his hand on the cedar picnic table.

Next to him, Alec huffed in annoyance. “Is that helping? Beating up the furniture, I mean. Not sure I’m getting the tactical value.”

“Shut up,” he snarled, glaring over at him. “I don’t recall asking your opinion.”

“Too bad. You’re getting it anyway.”

Jackson laughed, a short, humorless sound. “By all means, wise old sage, impart some wisdom. You’re going to whether I like it or not.”

His partner leaned back and grinned at him. “Damn straight I am. I think you should go run laps around the cabin until you’re too fucking tired to sit here and fidget like Kat on a caffeine binge.”

He cocked an eyebrow at Alec. “Is this an army thing? I’m a little nervous, so I have to do laps?”

“A *little* nervous?” Alec snorted. “Yeah, Jackson. Keep telling yourself that.”

Jackson’s hands itched. In the last five years, he and Alec had had a normal friendship, with the accompanying ups and downs. They’d laughed together, but they’d also beaten each other’s asses, and it was looking like today was going to be a case of the latter rather than the former. “Keep pickin’ at me, Jacobson, and I’ll smack you down. I’m not in the mood.”

Alec rose with enviable grace, the lazy grin still curling his lips. “Sure, if trying to land a punch on me will help, go right ahead.”

The cabin’s back door opened, and Mahalia stepped onto the porch with a steaming cup of coffee. She surveyed the scene in the yard. “Oh, Lord. Peyton!” she bellowed into the kitchen.

Nick appeared a moment later, looking a good bit less polished than Mahalia and stifling a yawn. “What—oh. Are they going to throw down?”

Jackson scowled and pointed his finger at her. “Stay out of this, Nicky.”

Nick merely laughed and leaned over the porch railing. “Kick his ass, Jackson. You can do it.”

Mahalia was less amused. “I *was* going to say, ‘Damn fool men,’ but you’re not much better, Nicole. You might even be worse.”

Jackson turned his attention back to Alec. “Let’s get one thing straight. I won’t be *trying* to hit you. I’ll be moppin’ the floor with your ass.”

“Uh-huh.” Alec swung his arms back and forth to loosen up. “What about you, Mahalia? Who are you laying your money on?”

She gave him a dark look. “I’m laying it on myself, Alexander, because when you two are finished acting like babies, I’m going to whoop both of y’all’s asses.”

Nick’s mug thumped on the railing. “No unfair advantages, Alec.”

Jackson shot her a disgusted look. “Nick.” His ego was already taking a beating, and they hadn’t thrown the first punch.

“What?” she asked innocently. “You’re not going to zap him, so he can’t get all Dark Warrior of the Night on you.”

Alec laughed with infuriating amusement. “Fair enough. We can both play nice.”

The door opened again. Michelle came out, as perfectly put together as Mahalia, and her gaze went from Alec to Jackson before jumping to her sister. “Are they going to—?”

“Fight?” Nick nodded and sipped her coffee. “I’ve got twenty bucks on Jackson.”

Mahalia looked sheepish. “Fifty on Alec. But I believe in fairness above all...” She closed her eyes and whispered something Jackson couldn’t hear.

A tingle of magic rushed through him, and he drew in a sharp breath. The world suddenly seemed slower, brighter, more intense. He could hear his own heart, as well as the leisurely beat of Alec’s. “May...”

“Now, when Alec pummels you, I’ll have won fair and square. You’ve got all the strength and speed of a shifter for about fifteen minutes, Jack.”

Nick hooted with laughter. “You’re on. Fifty bucks.” She nudged Michelle. “You want in on the action?”

“Fifty on Aaron,” Michelle replied before turning to look back into the house. Her quiet voice should have been too soft for him to understand, but with magic coursing through his veins, her words were clear. “Can I bet on you?”

Jackson heard a low chuckle as the bodyguard stepped through the doorway, his fingers sliding briefly against Michelle’s arm. The hulking man approached them, his short red hair blowing lightly in the breeze as he grinned. “If you don’t let me play, she’ll pout for months. You ever seen a Peyton pout? It’s horrible.”

“I see it all the time, buddy,” Jackson commiserated as he rolled up his sleeves. “It ain’t pretty.”

Nick pouted at Mahalia. “Is it too late for me to put my money on Alec?”

But Mahalia paid her no mind. “How do we want to do this? Flip a coin, third guy fights the winner? Or are y’all just going to brawl?”

Jackson stretched his shoulders and considered the question. “I just want to hit someone. I don’t care if it’s in a clean, organized fight or a dog pile.”

“Well, then.” Alec swung a punch at Aaron’s head.

“Hey!” Jackson rushed Alec and caught him with a shoulder in the stomach as Aaron recovered and threw a retaliatory punch at Alec. It hit Jackson instead, knocking him dizzy.

The fight soon dissolved into a blur of swinging fists, laughter, grunts, and the occasional muttered curse. Jackson could hear Nick cheering him on and whooping as he landed a hard punch to Alec’s midsection and caught another glancing blow from Aaron.

The back door of the cabin opened and closed, and a whistle pierced the air. Jackson elbowed Aaron one last time and looked up, panting.

Steven stood on the porch, looking stern. “Boys.”

Even doubled over and breathing hard from the solid punch Aaron had landed in his stomach, Alec managed a cocky grin. “Jackson needed to blow off some steam.”

The door opened again. John Peyton seemed less surprised by the scene on the back lawn. “Get it out of your system, Holt?”

He straightened before answering. “Yes, sir.”

“Good.” His steely blue gaze roved over the assembled group. “We move tomorrow.”

Jackson shot Alec a sober look. His partner nodded and straightened as well, wincing as he pressed one hand to his

side. “We should go over the plan one more time. Make sure everyone knows their parts.”

Jackson gingerly prodded his throbbing cheek. “Yeah. May?”

“Come on inside. We’ll get you fixed up and triple-check the talismans.” She turned, raising an eyebrow at Nick. “Our boys just cost us a hundred bucks.”

“Damn straight they did,” Nick agreed.

Jackson huffed at Alec. “We shouldn’t feel bad about that, right?”

“With that walking mountain swinging his fists around?” Alec grinned and slapped Aaron on the shoulder. “What do you do, anyway? Carry Michelle around under your arm?”

Aaron was almost completely unscathed except for a slight red mark on his jaw where Jackson had caught him with a stray fist. “Can’t. She bites.”

Alec laughed. “And you say I don’t talk much.”

“You don’t,” Jackson said absently, rubbing his knuckles as he walked back toward the porch. “He just talks less.” His mind was already back on getting Mackenzie out of Talbot’s clutches and back home.

Over the course of three days they’d turned the dining room table into a staging area for strategy and developed a carefully organized plan of attack. Steven and John took their places at the head of the table, leaving everyone else to perch

on bar stools or chairs. Steven waited until he had everyone's attention before speaking. "Going over this again may seem like overkill, but humor me."

He outlined the plan. Steven, Michelle and Mahalia were to neutralize Charles, with Nick and Aaron there to take care of physical attacks. Either or both of them would have been useful helping Jackson and Alec track down Mackenzie, but Aaron wouldn't leave Michelle's side, and Nick couldn't.

Michelle had admitted it to him the night before. "I don't think it's a coincidence that I'm one of the only Seers who's still sane. You can't imagine what it's like, having that much *power* roaring through you..." Her voice trailed off, but Jackson had been able to see the confusing mix of revulsion and pure yearning in her expression. "The more powerful the magic, the more I-I feel that. Like I want to use it again, keep using it. But when Nick's around, she grounds me. I can draw more power without losing control."

Which meant that Nick would have to stay with her, no matter what. He and Alec could find Mackenzie on their own, but it would take more time. Time was something they only had if Charles could be contained in the first place.

Nick stared at the blueprints of the house, the ones Jackson had already memorized. "There's one thing we haven't discussed."

"What's that?" Mahalia asked.

She raised an almost frightened gaze to Steven. “What if we can’t stop Talbot? What if all we can do is hold him off for a few minutes?”

“Then you all get the hell out of that house, as fast as you can.” Steven’s tone was quiet but firm. “I’ll stay behind. He’s not going to kill me.”

Mahalia started in shock. “Steven, that’s—”

Steven shook his head. “Not now, May. We’ll talk about it later.”

Her jaw clenched, and Jackson laid a hand on her arm. “What exactly is that supposed to accomplish, you staying behind? I think we all have a right to know that.”

“If you can’t get Mackenzie out, it’ll mean she’s not alone there. I swore I’d take care of her twenty-five years ago, and I’m not leaving without her.”

Jackson eyed him, incredulous. “I wasn’t aware that was an option.”

Alec spoke. “No one likes it, Jackson. But if we can’t contain Talbot, we may have to retreat. We’re not gonna do Mackenzie any good if we’re all dead.”

“If we manage to piss Talbot off badly enough, will any of that matter?” Jackson cast a quick glance at Michelle, who stood silently between her father and Aaron. “I’ve heard what happens to Seers when they get drunk off the power. They get a little high and then they get a little nuts.” He glared at

Steven. “How can you guarantee Mackenzie’s safety in that situation? Or your own for that matter? God knows what he’ll do if he well and truly loses his shit.”

Steven looked uncomfortable, and Alec said, “We’re going to try. You and I will do what we can to get her out, but you don’t get to make that decision for everyone. You can’t tell them they have to stay and die for nothing.”

“I’m not trying to boss anyone.” Jackson crossed his arms over his chest. “But I’m not leaving without Mackenzie.”

Nick shook her head. “I’m not leaving without Jackson.”

“Nicole.” Her father’s voice cracked through the room like a whip. “You’ll take care of your sister, and if Aaron tells you to leave, you’ll leave. Otherwise, none of you will go.”

She opened her mouth, snapped it shut and lowered her gaze. “Fine.”

Further argument on his part would only serve to plant the notion that perhaps the risk involved with the siege was too great. “I’ve fought his spell caster before. He’s pretty powerful, but cocky.” He nodded to Aaron. “The shifter is a decent fighter but smaller than you, and not too bright.”

Aaron returned his nod, his face just as impassive as Michelle’s, but the tense energy between the two of them was so strong Jackson could almost see it. For all of Michelle’s protestations, it was hard to believe anyone could miss the fact the two were in love.

Then again, with tensions so high around the table, everyone's emotions seemed closer to the surface. Steven had rested one hand on the back of Mahalia's chair and was leaning so close that his arm brushed her hair. But the line of her shoulders was stiff, and she wouldn't look at him. "Testing the talismans could mean trouble," she said, her tone a study in careful nonchalance. "We'll have to take our chances."

John surveyed the group. "It'll be quick, straightforward. Get onto the grounds and get to the house. If lethal force is necessary, the Conclave condones it. Charles Talbot has become too large a threat to ignore. Stalking, assault, kidnapping, murder... He's escalated past the point of leniency." He brushed a speck of lint from his sleeve. "The Conclave has only one request in return for its cooperation. If any wolves are taken alive, they're to be turned over to us. Casters, psychics and other shifters don't concern us. But we'll handle our own."

"Fine. We leave first thing in the morning." Steven's gaze landed on Jackson. "No more fighting."

Jackson couldn't tell whether he was talking about the brawling or the arguing, and he honestly didn't care. "I'm done. Let's get some rest."

Chapter Nineteen

At first Mackenzie harbored hope that Marcus would get over his anger and talk to her again. She even sought him out the morning after their fight, desperate to find a way to repair the damage she'd done. Marcus had been the closest thing to an ally she'd had, someone who at least wanted to treat her well.

Now he avoided her when he could, and was formally and coolly polite to her when she cornered him. After two days of it, she gave up and retreated to her room, growing more and more desperate about her situation.

In the middle of that second night she even considered giving in, making the best of a bad situation and trying to find what peace she could. Marcus had proven himself to be an entertaining and thoughtful companion when he wanted to be, and Charles obviously had enough money to support them both in anything they wanted to do. She'd live a comfortable life, for as long as she was willing.

And that was the catch. If Charles ever developed the slightest suspicion she might not be, it would be over. He'd

pay someone to wipe away her free will, and that would be it. Oh, she'd go on living in *theory*. Something that resembled her would walk and talk and have as many babies as they wanted. But it wouldn't be *her*.

Safety and comfort were nothing but an illusion. Charles's home was the proverbial golden cage, and she couldn't stay.

The only problem is...how do I get out?

She hadn't been outside since the first day, when Marcus had taken her running in the woods. She hadn't tried, either, but Mackenzie had a feeling it couldn't be as simple as walking to the door and opening it.

Of course, if it *was* that simple, she'd feel stupid for sitting around masterminding wild schemes for escape. She'd feel equally stupid if she worked out an escape plan only to find she couldn't get out the door at all.

Reconnaissance. They called it that in the movies. Mackenzie was starting to wish she'd watched more action flicks and fewer Sandra Bullock movies.

Common sense told her it would be easier to make excuses if she didn't seem to be trying to escape. She waited until after dinner before wandering by one of the side doors and stopping to peer out the window at the woods beyond. Even though she hadn't been outside, she'd been practicing

every night until she was sure she could shift forms easily. If she could get to the edge of the woods—

Trying to act casual, she wrapped her fingers around the cold metal of the old-fashioned doorknob. Her heart nearly leapt out of her chest with excitement when the knob turned easily under her hand, and the door pushed open. She took a deep breath and bolted.

Or tried to bolt. She hit the empty space of the doorframe and stopped. It was like falling face first onto a feather mattress—not painful, but she couldn't move forward.

Confused, she pulled back and tried again, this time leading with her shoulder. Her shoulder struck the barrier, and she felt the shock through her body as she jerked to a stop. There was nothing there. The breeze from outside blew against her face, and she could smell the freshly cut grass, hear the birds in the trees. Freedom was so close she could *taste* it.

She just couldn't get to it.

“That's some crazy shit right there, isn't it?” She whirled to find Eddie standing across the foyer, a bottle of beer dangling loosely from his fingers. Surprisingly, he wasn't laughing at her.

Mackenzie opened her mouth to deliver the excuse she'd carefully crafted. *I just wanted to go for a run, I just wanted a walk, I just—*

But Eddie obviously didn't care. She moved away from the open door and slumped wearily against the wall. "Crazy shit," she agreed.

"The old man has these things we have to carry so we can leave." He took a swig of beer and shook his head. "He keeps them locked away until he needs to send us out somewhere. Hope the fucking place doesn't burn down."

Eddie wasn't just drinking. He was drunk. "So everyone's trapped here?"

He scratched his head, barely stirring his almost militarily short brown hair. "Everyone except the boss. Though I kind of always got the feeling the barriers would drop if the bastard died."

The only thing that seemed less likely than escaping was surviving a direct confrontation with Charles. Mackenzie closed her eyes and fought her desire to sink to the floor. "Why do you do it?" she asked in a low voice. "Why do you fight for him? Kill for him? Why do you stay trapped in this house?"

When Eddie answered, he was closer. She opened her eyes to find him sitting at the bottom of the staircase. "There's good money in it. Besides," he added with a bit of a sneer, "maybe if there are more cougars, you can give the wolves a run for their money. Damn sons of bitches run everything."

"I thought you *were* a wolf."

He rubbed his thumb absently over the bottle. “Not to hear them tell it.” He drained the rest of the bottle and gave her a flat look. “I was attacked. Changed. I used to be human, and now I’m nothing but a mutt.” For a moment he looked vulnerable, hurt. Then he just looked like he wished he had another beer.

Mackenzie sank to the floor, pulled her legs to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. “Isn’t there a better way to change things? If I have these...magical kids, what are they supposed to do? Run around ruining people’s lives, the way yours was ruined?”

Eddie shrugged. “It wouldn’t have to be that way, necessarily. Some people want to do it. Change, I mean.”

“So you’re not going to help me.” It wasn’t quite a question.

“I might be a simple idiot, but I don’t have a death wish.” He snorted. “Even if I wanted to help you, trying would just get us both killed.” His hazel eyes softened. “Look, would it be so bad? I mean, you’d be rich as fuck, and you’d have Marcus. It’s a hell of a lot more than most people get.”

If she hadn’t known better, she could have sworn Eddie was jealous of her.

Why is that so crazy? Lots of people wanted to be rich, and Marcus was attractive, if you appreciated tall, dark and handsome men. *I guess there’s no reason Eddie can’t.*

The brief glimpse of humanity didn't change the fact that he'd killed people to get to her. She pushed down sympathy and rose to her feet again. "I'm not interested in being someone's pet."

"Suit yourself." Eddie shrugged and stood, as well. "But the old bastard always gets what he wants, Mackenzie. One way or another."

"So he told me." The smile she gave him felt sick. "I guess I won't have to worry about it, though. If he gets mad he's just going to wipe my personality. I won't even notice I'm being raped. Should make it easier for Marcus to get the job done."

He definitely looked sick. "Crazy shit." He swayed and started in the direction of the kitchen. "If you need me, I'll be raiding the liquor cabinet."

"Have fun with that," she snapped, slumping against the barrier in the open door again. It was impenetrable as ever, and she fought the urge to cry in frustration.

So much for Plan A.

Mackenzie dragged in a breath and closed the door with growing desperation. Plan A was a bust, but she'd figured it might be. Now wasn't the time to panic. She'd go upstairs to her room, sit down and come up with a Plan B.

At the rate things were going, maybe C, D and E, as well.

Hours later, Mackenzie flopped back on her bed and stared at the ceiling, tears of hopelessness threatening again. Every plan she could think of involved getting out of the house. If Eddie had been telling the truth, that meant getting her hands on whatever item it was that let people come and go at will.

Something. Something. It was hardly the easiest description to go on. It could have been *anything*, from a mystical pendant to an old copy of the Sunday Times. Even if she managed to figure out what it was, she'd have to find out where Charles kept them and determine a way to get around his protections.

That seemed as likely as surviving a face-to-face showdown with him.

Mackenzie sighed and covered her face with her hands. Time was running out, and all she had to show for it was a rising sense of panic.

Someone knocked on the door, quick and urgent, and she heard the sound of shuffling feet in the hallway. "Mackenzie, open the door."

Marcus. She recognized his voice easily enough but, more disturbing, she recognized his *scent*, even through the door. She rolled off the bed and padded across the room to open the door.

For the first time since she'd met him, he looked disheveled, almost haggard. "How serious are you about wanting to get out of here?" he asked without preamble.

Her heart leapt. *It could be a trap.* But she didn't know how things could get worse at this point. And what would they have to gain by it? Charles already knew she didn't want to be here.

"I'm serious. Really, really serious."

He shoved something into her hand. "Get your shoes. We've got to go *now*."

It was a small wooden circle of smooth, polished wood, something dark that might have been mahogany. A hole drilled through the top had a thin piece of leather threaded through it, long enough that it would be easy to slip over her head and wear beneath her shirt.

She'd expected something mystical looking, like an impressive gold medallion with ancient runes. But what the hunk of wood lacked in looks, it made up for in power. Even holding it made her palm tingle.

Marcus made an impatient noise and she started. Without a word she slipped it over her head and tucked the wooden disc beneath her shirt. It warmed against her skin, but the tingling feeling faded after a few seconds. By the time she found her shoes, she hardly noticed it.

She pulled them on in silence and looked at Marcus. “Okay.”

He laid his hands on her shoulders. “If Da—if Charles finds us, I don’t know what he’ll do, but it might be bad. Are you prepared for that?”

Mackenzie swallowed. “He told me that he’s going to have a psychic come in and make me agree. Wipe my personality and tell you I had a change of heart. I’ll risk just about anything to avoid that.”

“Me too.” One hand fell away from her, and the other slid down her arm and wrapped around her icy fingers. “Come on. We’ll have to shift and run for it, but I have more clothes and things waiting for us at the property line.”

“Okay.” She squeezed his hand. “Thank you, Marcus.”

“Shh,” he hissed as they headed out of her room and toward the stairs. “Thank me later.”

They descended the staircase quietly, without incident, and she was on the last step when Marcus went rigid. She smelled it a heartbeat later—man, what she’d come to recognize as wolf, and expensive whiskey.

“Eddie.” Marcus’s voice was tense.

He lounged in the doorway, much as he had earlier, peering at them through bleary eyes. “Well, well.”

Her mouth went dry. She tightened her fingers around Marcus’s, unsure of what to do. “Hello, Eddie.”

The big man didn't say anything at first, just raised the nearly empty bottle in his hand. It stopped short of his mouth, and he heaved a rough sigh, his eyes on Marcus. "Go on. Run."

"Eddie—" She couldn't see Marcus's face, but he sounded apologetic. Almost guilty.

"For fuck's sake, Marc, get out of here." Eddie motioned for the door, and his voice dropped to a raw whisper. "*Go.*"

When Marcus didn't move, Mackenzie stepped off the staircase and yanked on his hand. Her eyes found Eddie's, and the pained look of loss and misery in his eyes tugged at her. "Thank you."

He turned away.

Marcus finally pulled her toward the door, and they slipped through the invisible barrier and out into the night. He led her away from the house at a brisk walk and around to a row of hedges. "Take off everything but the talisman. You'll need it." He kicked out of his shoes and started removing his clothes.

She followed suit, stripping off the borrowed clothing as quickly as she could. The night breeze was cool enough to make her shiver as she stood in front of Marcus, naked except for the talisman that hung between her breasts.

She ran her fingers over it lightly. "What will happen to it when I shift? It's not gonna fall off, is it?"

“You shift first. I’ll adjust it and make sure it won’t. I know how much to tighten mine, but I’m not sure about you.”

“Okay.” She shivered again, more from nerves than the chill. She closed her eyes and concentrated on finding that inner spark of magic and letting it flow through her.

Her hours of practice made it easy. A few heartbeats and she opened her eyes to a very different world. Sights and sounds and scents assaulted her at first, but she was already growing used to the confused jumble. Marcus smelled like safety, and her instincts moved her across the space separating them. She bumped her head into his leg, terrified and needing the contact even if it wasn’t nearly as satisfying as it would be when he had shifted as well.

He knelt before her. The leather cord had two slip knots, each end tied around it, and he tugged them apart until he could barely slide two fingers between the cord and the heavy weight of her fur. “There. Follow me, but we have to be quick. I won’t stop unless you do, not until we get past the last ward.”

She acknowledged his words by nudging his hand with her head and backing away so he could shift as well. He did, his scent and form changing until he stood before her on four legs. He uttered a deep, purring growl, turned and ran.

It wasn’t so different from her dreams, racing across the side yard and into the dark woods, except for the fear

pounding through her veins. In her dreams, the danger had been vague, nebulous. Here it was real. Known.

She ran, as fast as she could, until her lungs and muscles burned. She couldn't stop, though, had to keep pace with Marcus. Just when she thought she could go no farther, he stopped, panting.

Then Marcus was human again, kneeling on the ground by a large hollow log. "Jesus *Christ*." He clutched at his side and grimaced as he dragged a black bag from the log.

Mackenzie was too exhausted to shift immediately. She collapsed to the ground and panted for breath, wondering faintly if she'd even be able to change back at all.

It took several minutes for her to find the energy to reach inside and resume her human form. She stretched out on her side on the forest floor, pine needles and branches poking uncomfortably against her skin. The cold ground leached the heat from her body, but she hurt too much to move.

Marcus had already dressed in a pair of jeans when he returned to her side. "Get up, Mackenzie. You've got to get into some clothes and get to the car." He dragged a black T-shirt over his head and helped her sit. "Come on."

She had no idea how she summoned the strength, but somehow she got the button-up shirt and sweatpants on. The sneakers he'd brought for her were too big, but she put them on her bare feet. "How far to the car?" She rose on shaky legs.

She swayed, and he pulled her into his arms. “Just over this rise here—” He stumbled but regained his footing. “Okay. I’m okay. Let’s go.”

Marcus carried her to a dark sedan parked at the edge of the woods, out of sight of the road below, and set her next to the passenger door. The car alarm blipped, the locks disengaged, and he jogged to the other side. They both scrambled into the car, and Mackenzie tugged at her tangled seatbelt with a low curse. “Where are you planning to go?”

“I was hoping you’d have some ideas.” He turned the key in the ignition and the engine purred to life. “Boston, probably. At first.”

She had to call Jackson before she did anything else. “There’s some people I can call, I think. The ones who were helping me. If you have a cell phone, maybe I can call information...”

“There’s a disposable one in the glove compartment.” His hands tightened on the wheel. “Just in case he decides to try technology instead of magic to find us. I doubt it, but I don’t want to take any unnecessary chances.”

Mackenzie found the phone and powered it on before she realized she had no idea if Jackson’s cell phone would even be listed. She could probably find a number for his office, though, or maybe someone at the bar could tell her how to reach Nick.

The tiny clock on the cell phone blinked on, and she groaned. “Jesus, I didn’t realize it was three in the morning.”

“I got things settled and ready as fast as I could.” He sounded apologetic. “It took me several days to free up some money and find someone trustworthy to help with the magical things like the clothes.”

She froze with her finger on the keypad. “Our clothes are magical?”

He spared her a quick glance as he flipped on his blinker and turned onto what looked like a main highway. “Had to be, so Charles can’t track us. Well, not as easily.”

“God, I forgot about that.” She shivered and glanced at the phone again. The bars on the left side indicating reception had disappeared. As she watched, one reappeared but vanished. “Reception is crap. How far are we from civilization?”

“Depends on what you consider civilized.” Marcus kept checking the rearview mirror, as if he expected Charles to be hot on their heels. “It shouldn’t be long before you get a better signal. But you can call your friends in the morning, if you want. We should be in Boston in a few hours.”

Jackson would be worried, but Mackenzie was exhausted. It was hard to keep her drooping eyelids open, and sleep called to her. She could spend a few frustrating hours battling a weak

signal and waking people while she tried to track someone down. Maybe she should.

Or you could take a nap and call around later when you're coherent.

She tucked the cell phone back into the glove compartment and curled on her side. "You're probably as exhausted as I am, but would you mind if I took a nap? I haven't been sleeping much since Charles told me that stuff about the psychic."

"Sleep. I've got a lot of driving to do and...a lot to think about."

It was hard to believe he'd been the person she feared most in the world a few short days earlier. The pain in his voice urged her to rest a hand awkwardly on his arm. "I'm sorry, Marcus. I didn't—I wish it could have been different."

He tensed under her touch. "Don't. I did this as much for myself as for you. Maybe more."

"Still." She dropped her hand back to her lap. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Me, too."

Chapter Twenty

Jackson rubbed his thumb over the warm surface of his mug and stared out the window over the sink. Dawn was breaking, the sun setting the clouds on fire as it rose above the horizon. It finally broke free of the trees and forced his gaze away.

Nick stood just inside the kitchen, one shoulder against the open doorframe. “Hi.”

“Hi.” He tried to smile, but it felt more like a grimace. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough to know you’re worried.” She shoved her fingers through her hair and braced her hip against the wood. “Don’t be. It makes me nervous.”

“Can’t help it, Peyton.” Not for the first time, Jackson considered the risk Nick was taking, not only with her own life, but with her sister’s, as well. “Nicky—”

“Knock it off, Holt.” Her words might have been flippant, but her expression was serious, almost scared. “None of that ‘if we don’t make it out of this alive’ shit. I’ll hurt you.”

“He’ll snap out of it.” It was Alec’s voice, quiet behind them. “He always does when it’s time to get down to business.”

“He’d better.” Nick glanced at Alec and shot Jackson a stern look. “Mackenzie works for me. I hired her. I took her in. She’s my responsibility. And don’t get me wrong. I like her. I do. But I like my sister more. If Michelle is going to be in danger, you need to get straight, okay?”

“I’m fine,” Jackson said harshly. “Just because I care doesn’t mean I’m an idiot.”

“No one thinks you are.” Alec crossed the kitchen. “We wouldn’t be going in there with you if we did. But it’s just us, Jackson, when it comes down to it. Everyone else’s priority is going to be Charles. It’s you and me going after your girl, and if you get my ass killed because you’re distracted, I’m coming back to haunt you.”

“And if he can’t manage it,” Nick added, “I’ll find someone who can make you *think* he’s haunting you.”

“I get it. My head will be in it, I promise.”

She continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “I’m not afraid of death, but it would be a crying shame if I bought the farm before I had the chance to bag your secretary’s hot cousin.” She grabbed another mug and filled it from the coffee carafe. “Just my personal feelings on the subject.”

Alec smirked. “Tell us something we don’t know. That’s pretty much the worst-kept secret in New Orleans.”

Nick favored them both with a wry look as she added cream and sugar to her mug. “Then help a girl out. I’ve dropped so many hints I’m starting to trip over them.”

Jackson pulled out a chair at the kitchen table. The banter felt normal, like everything might turn out all right. “Maybe he’s not interested in a tee-tiny loudmouth,” he offered helpfully.

Oddly, Alec’s reply was more earnest. “Derek likes you too much.” He ignored their startled looks as he poured himself a mug of coffee. “He wasn’t born a shifter, Nicole. He’s got a lot of odd instincts he didn’t have to deal with before, and he wasn’t ready to start anything that might end up serious.”

Jackson stared at his partner, open-mouthed. He hadn’t known Alec had spent that much time with Derek Gabriel, much less talked about such personal things with him. “When did you become a confidante to lovelorn werewolves everywhere?”

Alec stomped over to the table, glaring. “It was once. Kat was worried, so I promised her I’d help him out. It’s not like guys like him have a lot of people to go to for help.”

Nick was suspiciously quiet as she stared into her coffee. When she finally raised her head, her eyes were wide and

bright. “Don’t you *dare* get me killed, Jackson Holt. I have things to do when we get home.”

“Let me guess,” Mahalia drawled as she walked in and headed for the refrigerator. “Derek Gabriel?”

Jackson raised his mug in salute. “Got it in one.”

She clucked her tongue. “You always have had it bad for that boy, Nicole.”

“See?” Alec took a sip of his coffee and grinned. “Worst-kept secret in New Orleans.”

Mahalia smiled at Nick’s flustered look. “Hell, Jacobson. Who do you think introduced them?”

“You couldn’t have locked them in a closet somewhere and saved the rest of us several years of sexual tension?”

Nick choked on a strangled noise, and Mahalia laughed. “You hush up, Alec. Everyone knows you’re just a soft old romantic at heart. Am I right, Jack?”

“You always are, May.”

Alec rose with his mug. “Fuck you, man. I’m going to go pack my shit. I’ve had about all the touchy-feely crap I can take for a morning.”

This time, the noise that escaped Nick was undoubtedly a laugh. “Be back in time for the group hug, Alec,” she called.

Jackson barely managed to avoid snorting coffee out his nose. “Oh, Christ. Now she’s giddy.”

Mahalia shook her head. “You’re going to have a hard row to hoe if you set your cap for Derek Gabriel, Nicole. I hope you know that.”

Nick didn’t look concerned. “I don’t want to marry the guy, Mahalia. I just want to date him.”

“Mm-hmm.” The older woman’s eyes were shrewd. “Famous last words, baby girl.”

The front door opened, and Steven walked in with John Peyton close at his heels. Both men looked deadly serious, and there was a tension between them that made Jackson edgy. Steven’s gaze slid over the room and stopped on Mahalia. “May, will you step outside with me for a second?”

She stared at him as she took a carton of eggs out of the refrigerator. “That depends. Do you want to talk to me alone, or does John Peyton want to talk to Jack and Nicole?”

The older man flinched visibly, but his attention didn’t waver from Mahalia. The pain in Steven’s eyes was so intense Jackson felt like he was intruding on something private. “I want to talk to you.”

Nick cleared her throat and nudged Mahalia, earning a sharp look. Jackson caught his friend’s eye and jerked his head toward the hall. “Nicky, can you help me with something?”

“No need to leave.” Mahalia tightened the belt of her robe and walked past the two men to the back door. “I like to have all my futile, pointless arguments before breakfast, anyway.”

Steven didn't meet Jackson's gaze. He followed Mahalia, jerking the door shut behind him.

John Peyton turned his attention to his daughter. "We'll be leaving shortly. Is everything in order?"

Her spine straightened. "Yes, sir. We've coordinated as best we can without more information."

Jackson glanced out the window in the back door as Nick explained the particulars of their last-minute plans to her father. Usually, Mahalia's fits of temper, while impressive, were short-lived, but it didn't seem as though she'd be getting over her anger at Steven any time soon.

Mackenzie jerked awake as a hand on her arm shook her slightly. "Hey. I got us a room."

Marcus looked exhausted, and she could hardly blame him. Her body felt stiff and sore as she climbed out of the car and gazed at the friendly brick facade of a familiar chain hotel. "Are we in Boston?"

"Yeah."

"I need to try to call the people who were helping me."

He nodded and pulled a bag from the backseat. "Let's go upstairs. We can get some food and you can use the phone in the room."

The room was clean and comfortable. Marcus ordered enough food to feed them twice over and disappeared into the

bathroom, leaving her on the bed with the phone and a directory.

By the time room service showed up with two rickety carts, she'd established that no one was answering any of the business phones—not surprising, she supposed, as it was barely past six in the morning in New Orleans—and no one had their home numbers listed.

She left messages everywhere she could think of, which was exactly two places: Jackson's office and Nick's bar. As an afterthought, she'd found a listing for Mahalia's home and called it as well, trying not to wonder what it might mean that the phone rang and rang without anyone answering.

She unloaded the various trays from two carts as a way to distract herself as she tried to figure out another way to contact Jackson. By the time Marcus emerged from the bathroom again, freshly scrubbed but wearing the same clothing—*warded against Charles's magic*, she reminded herself—she'd run out of ideas.

She smiled and gestured to the overloaded table. "There's a lot of food."

His answering smile was relieved but guarded. "Good. I'm famished."

"I figured." She swallowed, uncertain about how to proceed. She'd torn his life apart with her very presence, and though it hadn't been her fault...

I still feel guilty.

She dropped into one of the chairs. “I have no idea what to say.”

“You have nothing to say. Nothing to explain.” He lifted a saucer of sliced fruit from the table and picked at it. “I believe that ball is firmly in my court.”

Mackenzie winced. “But you didn’t know.”

His lips twisted in a poor approximation of a smile. “You don’t feel, even slightly, that I should have?”

There was no answer to that. She thought, briefly, of offering him a gentle lie, but in the end she just sighed. “I don’t know, Marcus. How can anyone? The whole thing is just so screwed up.”

“An inarguable fact.”

“How else can I contact people? Someone said Nick’s father was someone important. Maybe I could find him?”

“Nick?”

“Nicole Peyton. Her father’s the...” She furrowed her brow and tried to recall the conversation she’d had with Jackson. “The Alpha? The big boss daddy werewolf.”

Marcus’s eyes widened. “John Wesley Peyton, yes. Yes, he is. We could call his office in New York, but we wouldn’t get far.”

“Shit.” She sighed and rubbed at her temples. “Okay. I guess I’ll keep calling Jackson’s office. Their assistant should show up in a couple hours.”

“Why don’t you try to get some sleep?”

Mackenzie struggled to summon a smile for him. “I think you’re the one who needs sleep. You look done in.”

His gaze slid past her. “There are two beds, and no reason we can’t both sleep.”

“Yeah, I just—” She wouldn’t be able to sleep again, not without talking to Jackson. She had to tell him she was safe, hear his voice, tell him she’d see him soon. *God. I’m pathetic.*

“I get it,” Marcus interrupted. “Eat something, all right? After that, you can keep making your calls.”

Heat flooded her cheeks. She ducked her head and stared at a stack of pancakes to avoid having to meet his eyes. “Thanks, Marcus. Not just for this. For everything.”

“Don’t thank me. Please.” He dropped the saucer back to the table and eyed the glass doors leading to the balcony. “I need a minute, okay? I’ll be right back.”

She felt helpless. There was nothing to do but watch in silence as he crossed the room and slipped through the glass door. Mackenzie waited until it slid shut before picking up the telephone again.

She’d called the office so many times in the last hour she’d memorized the number. She dialed it and held up the

phone, listening to five rings followed by Kat's chipper, friendly voice. "You've reached Holt and Jacobson Investigations—"

Mackenzie slammed the phone down and fought a snarl of frustration. Her stomach growled instead, a loud-enough noise to make her start. "Fine." She surveyed the vast meal in front of her. "I'll eat. I'll sit in a hotel room, talk to myself and slowly go crazy. Crazier."

The pancakes on her plate had no insights to offer. For that reason, she took particular joy in eating them first.

There was something almost anticlimactic about storming Charles's lair.

The process was highly involved, almost tedious, and required them to stop a hundred feet outside each protective barrier while Michelle gathered her power and channeled it through the amulets she and Mahalia had prepared with painstaking care.

By the time they reached the last protective ward, Michelle looked pale and unsteady. Aaron murmured something to her as she stopped, the words too soft for Jackson to make out. She smiled wanly in return and shook her head, but leaned against him as she closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

He didn't feel anything, which was the most frightening part. Michelle was gathering a massive amount of magical energy, but she was expending just as much magic to hide her efforts. If he hadn't *seen* her do it—twice, no less—he might not have believed it possible.

The fact that the man holding Mackenzie had just as much power—and decades of experience using it—was something he tried not to think about.

The amulet around his wrist turned hot, and Michelle gasped. “I—I think—” She swayed, and Aaron steadied her as Nick stifled a gasp of her own.

He looked at the carved wooden disk, doing his best to ignore the rust-colored smears of Steven's dried blood on it. “You did it, Michelle. They're working.”

“Never doubted it for a minute, honey.” Mahalia laid a hand on Michelle's shoulder, her dark red nails a stark contrast to the borrowed T-shirt the Seer wore, and Jackson shuddered. *More blood*. He was suddenly glad he didn't believe in omens.

Nick stepped forward. She'd dressed Michelle in her clothes, and they wore the exact same outfit. It had taken Michelle a while to understand why Nick would want to risk someone mistaking them for each other, but she hadn't argued. It would be dangerous for Nick, but none of them would be safe. Now, looking at them was like looking at a mirror

reflection, and Jackson could have sworn even the magic surging through Michelle was echoed in her sister.

“You going to make it?” she asked softly, rubbing Michelle’s arm.

Michelle opened her eyes, and her lips curled into a self-deprecating smile that Jackson recognized all too well. Michelle could have been Nick then, right down to the slightly wry tone in her voice, even if the words were too formal. “I suppose I’ve gotten used to being the most intimidating person around. For a second I didn’t think it would work.”

“You did good.” Nick surveyed the break in the trees ahead and bit her lip. “The house is just over that rise.”

Jackson nudged Alec. “Should we go in separately from the others?”

His partner frowned and cast a look at Steven. “Is Michelle going to have to blow off the front door to get us in?”

Steven hesitated just long enough to make the answer clear. “Maybe.”

“So we go in together.” Alec grinned at Michelle, though it must have taken great effort to hide his discomfort as he patted her arm encouragingly. “Make a lot of commotion when you knock, Michelle. That should get everyone’s attention.”

The way her face lit at Alec's acceptance was heartbreaking. "I don't think I can do it quietly. Jackson and Mahalia had better shield for all they're worth, though, or the backlash will knock them over."

Jackson held up both hands. "Consider me warned."

Nick whispered something to Aaron and glanced at Jackson. "We all know what to do."

Try our best and hope like hell it works. "Yeah."

Steven and Alec took the lead. Michelle fell into step behind them, with Nick pressed tightly to her right side and Aaron towering next to her, one hand hovering over her back. Mahalia slid her hand into Jackson's as they cleared the trees and crested the rise. The house came into view, and she sighed nervously. "Here goes nothing, Jack."

They made it to the front door, and the blood pounded in Jackson's ears as he steeled himself against Michelle's magic. Still, he thought his head might explode along with the wood, and it took him a moment to orient himself as the group charged through the shattered remains of the front door, guns drawn, spells at the ready.

Alec and Steven jerked to a stop so quickly Michelle bumped into Steven and stumbled back into Jackson. He barely caught her as ironic applause filled the room.

A large, curving staircase rose in front of them. Charles stood on the fourth step, surveying them with absolutely no

surprise as he brought his hands together one last time and smiled. “Goodness, Miss Peyton. Was that entirely necessary? You youngsters are so ostentatious.”

The two men who’d attacked them outside the bar flanked Charles, and Jackson’s heart stuttered. “Where’s Mackenzie?”

The Seer’s icy blue gaze focused on Jackson, and there was nothing left of sanity in his expression. The utter lack of emotion, of anything human, chilled him. Charles acknowledged his reaction with a tiny, wry smile and a nod. “So. You must be the reason she was so resistant. At first.”

Crazy as a fucking loon. He glanced at Alec and saw his partner had come to the same conclusion. “Look, we’d all love to hang around and engage in some banter—”

“She’s gone.” The flat, weary words came from the shifter beside Talbot, the one he’d fought in the alley by Nick’s bar. “Marcus took her and left.”

Charles sighed in disappointment. Power surged, magic so strong it made even Michelle’s formidable energy pale in comparison. Charles flicked a finger as if knocking away a piece of lint, and the large shapeshifter grunted as his feet flew out from under him and his body flipped over the banister and barreled into the wall. The drywall buckled when he crashed into it, and the man sank to the floor, unconscious.

“I’ve had quite enough of traitors,” Charles said, his voice chillingly casual. Jackson realized too late that he’d turned to

watch the shapeshifter fly against the wall. He yanked his attention back to Charles.

Charles held a gun in his hand. The world slowed, the time between each heartbeat an eternity as Jackson scrambled for his magic. Michelle gasped softly, and Alec swore and aimed his own gun at Charles.

Too slow. The barrel of Charles's gun swung in a perfect arch to point directly at Steven's head. His finger twitched once, and he fired.

Mahalia screamed, and chaos erupted.

Nick caught Steven as he slumped toward the floor, and Aaron shielded Michelle's body with his own. Alec and Jackson returned fire, but their bullets skittered to a stop a foot shy of Charles and clattered to the marble stairs.

Charles smiled at them and rasped in a labored breath. Mahalia chanted, her dark eyes alight with fury, and the Seer clutched his throat.

Under Aaron, Michelle gasped. Magic gathered in the room, taking on visible colors as Mahalia's voice grew louder. Mahalia wasn't incredibly strong, but rage fed her power, and Jackson felt the tug as she reached out and gathered magic from every available source.

Charles's response was more direct. He dropped one hand to clench around the shoulder of his last remaining ally. The small spell caster sucked in a sharp breath, and Jackson had

only a heartbeat to brace himself as Charles ripped the power from the man's body.

The caster screamed, high and pained, and the world exploded. Darkness engulfed Jackson, and he cursed as everything fell away.

Chapter Twenty-One

Mackenzie ate, showered and flipped through every channel on the television. Twice. She brushed out her hair and braided it tightly. She unwove it and left it hanging around her shoulders. She paged through the phonebook on a whim, and called directory assistance once looking for John Peyton in New York City. She even called thirteen of the twenty-seven results before she gave up.

Marcus slept through all of it, dead to the world, and so worn and exhausted even in sleep that she didn't have the heart to wake him.

She was on her third pass through the television when the phone finally rang. She lunged for it, heart in her chest, and answered in a shaking voice. "Hello?"

"Mackenzie?" The voice was young and female, but so nervous she didn't recognize it at first. "Holy shit, where are you? Is Jackson there?"

"Kat?" Mackenzie's fingers clenched around the phone. "No. Have you heard from him? Is Mahalia all right? I tried to call her house—"

“Wait, wait—” Mackenzie heard Kat’s muttered curses clearly, as well as the sound of keys clacking on a keyboard. “Jackson didn’t find you? You’re not with him?”

“I’m in Boston.”

“Fuck.”

The panic in Kat’s voice set Mackenzie’s heart to racing, and she curled her free hand around the edge of the bed and tried to control her breathing. “What’s going on, Kat?”

“Shit. Nothing, don’t freak out.” More keys clacked, and Kat swore again. “Hey, can I put you on hold for a second?”

“No! Kat, what’s going *on*?”

“They’re going in to get you. Or they think they are—” Kat’s voice stopped abruptly. “Shit, this is all coming out wrong. Just hold on a second, okay? I want to try their phones.”

Mackenzie’s heart pounded so loudly she could barely hear Kat’s words. “Hurry.”

“Stay on the line, I’ll be right back.”

Mackenzie listened to the silence on the other end of the phone and tried not to think of how many things could go wrong if Jackson and Alec and Nick were trying to get into Charles’s house to rescue her.

The line clicked again all too soon, and Kat’s worried voice filled her ears. “No one’s answering. Everything’s going

straight to voicemail. They're probably already on their way in, or maybe on their way out—"

"Shit. Kat, it's dangerous. Charles Talbot is *crazy*. He's so damn strong."

"They know that, Mackenzie." Kat sounded like she was trying to convince both of them. "Don't underestimate Jackson. He's smart and really good, and Alec's a scary motherfucker. They've got Nick and Nick's dad and even Nick's sister—oh—*oh!*"

Mackenzie's heart jumped. "What?"

"Nick's dad. I can try to call Nick's dad. There's no way he went in with them."

"You have his number? I can call him."

Kat cut her off. "No. Oh, hell no. The fucking Alpha? I haven't got his number, but I can find it."

"How?"

Kat laughed nervously. "Did Jackson and Alec tell you anything about me?"

"Just that you're their assistant. And psychic."

"Yeah, I'm not really a secretary, though. I mean, I answer their phones, but they pay me for my other skills."

The roundabout explanation frustrated Mackenzie. "Jesus, Kat. Just spit it out."

"Sorry. I'm a nervous babbler. I mean, when I get nervous sometimes I talk a lot—" *Obviously*. Mackenzie ground her

teeth and to keep from interrupting. “But what I’m trying to say... I’m sort of a computer whiz. I mean, good with the less-than-legal stuff.”

“You’re a hacker?” Mackenzie asked incredulously. It was hard to reconcile the cute, sweet-faced young woman in the girly sundress with that mental image.

Then again, she hadn’t expected Jackson to be some kind of wizard. She didn’t feel like a shapeshifter.

“Hacker. I don’t care what Mari says, that word is so misused. There’s all this craziness about computer geeks trying to reappropriate it, and all the crap about it being a benign phrase, but it really is insulting since the etymology—”

“Kat.” Mackenzie cut her off. “Focus, would you?”

“Right. John Peyton.” The noise of keys clacking returned. “Hey, I’m going to go so I can make some calls. I’ll call you back when I can, okay? If I get Jackson, I’ll give him your number.”

“Okay.” She took a breath. “Thanks, Kat.”

“Sure, Mackenzie. Hang in there, okay? I’m glad you’re not all caught in the evil clutches of a crazy criminal mastermind anymore.”

“Thanks. Me too, I guess.”

“Yeah. Talk to you soon.”

The line clicked, leaving Mackenzie staring at the phone with a confusing mixture of worry and bewilderment. *Jesus. That is one weird kid.*

When Jackson was safely in front of her, she'd tell him that. With a tiny smile, Mackenzie hung up the phone and sat back on the bed to wait.

Please be safe. Please be here soon.

“Jesus, Holt. Wake the fuck up already.”

Jackson blinked, trying to clear the fog from his head. For a moment, he couldn't remember where he was or why he was there.

Then it all snapped into place.

“May,” he muttered, sitting abruptly. “Shit, what—”

Mahalia sat across the foyer, cradling Steven's head in her lap. Her eyes were swollen, red. “Jack.”

Steven was dead.

Alec steadied him. “Nick's only just now coming around, and Michelle's out cold. Whatever the bastard did stunned me and Aaron long enough for him to get out, but it hit all of you casters hard. And Nick, for some reason.”

“Michelle's magic.” Jackson's voice came out sounding too thick. “She's sharing it with Nick.” He couldn't tear his eyes away from Steven's motionless form. “He shot him.”

“Yeah.” Alec crouched and lowered his voice. “You’ve got to talk to Mahalia. She won’t let anyone check on her. Won’t move either.”

Charles had shot him. His own nephew. “Okay.”

Jackson made it to his feet and walked slowly across the slick floor. Nick stared at him as he passed, her face and shirt streaked with blood, and he looked away.

“May.” He knelt beside her and covered one of her hands with his. “May—”

“We can’t leave him here,” she whispered, stroking her thumb over the dead man’s cheek. “Do you think Michelle’s friend could carry him?”

Alec knelt by Mahalia’s other side. “He’s got his hands full with Michelle, Mahalia. She hasn’t woken up yet. He’s pretty worried.”

Her face hardened. “We can’t leave him here.”

Jackson shook his head. “I’ll carry him myself if I have to.”

“My father could send a helicopter,” Nick said hoarsely from her position beside Michelle. “He could take you both back to New York this morning, Mahalia.”

“Cell phones aren’t worth a damn out here, but I’m sure Talbot’s got a landline somewhere.” Alec pushed himself to his feet again. “I’ll take Nick and we’ll find one. Call her dad.”

Dead. Steven's dead. The thought kept pounding through Jackson's head. "You hear that? Alec and Nick are going to take care of it."

She grabbed his hand suddenly. "Find him, Jack. You promise me you'll find Charles Talbot."

The flat, shocked look in her eyes made him shiver. "I will. I promise."

Silence fell again, stretching out between them unbroken until a low groan sounded on the other side of the room. The shapeshifter who'd been working for Charles stirred from his awkward position, slumped underneath the cracked remains of the sheetrock wall. "Fuck."

Jackson was on his feet before he realized he'd moved, and he didn't stop until he had his hands wrapped in the guy's shirt. He dragged him up the wall and hissed a curse. "Where is she? Where did your boss take her?"

The man's eyes slid open, and he looked like he was trying to focus. "He ran. Marcus found out what Talbot was going to do to her, and they ran. That's all I know."

He tugged at his shirt and slammed him back into the wall again. "Think real hard. What else?"

"Fuck you, man. Did it look like I was in the know?" Strong hands wrapped around Jackson's wrists, the grip painful. "I'm in the shithouse for letting them go. Your little kitten turned this place upside-down."

Nick stepped up beside them, sparing the man a cold glare. “My father is already on his way. Mackenzie called your office, and Kat called him.”

“She’s safe?” Relief weakened Jackson’s knees, and he glanced over at Alec. “Where did he take her?”

“They’re holed up in a hotel in Boston. I called Kat. She said Mackenzie was frantic, but seemed okay. Mostly worried about you.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” Jackson muttered.

“Shouldn’t be long.” Nick rubbed her hands over her face. “They’re only about five minutes out, but we won’t all fit in the helicopter.” Her gaze strayed to Michelle. “I need to make sure she’s okay.”

She rushed off, and Jackson echoed her gesture by scrubbing wearily at his eyes. “We can’t wait for them to make another trip back to pick us up. How long would it take us to drive to Boston?”

Alec shrugged. “Five or six hours, depending on how morning traffic is. Peyton’s going to have other things on his mind besides Mackenzie, especially with his daughter unconscious and a crazed Seer on the loose. We probably need to get our asses in the car and drive.”

Jackson nodded. “So that’s what we’ll do. Can you keep an eye on this guy while I make sure Mahalia’s holding up?”

“Yeah. No problem.”

When Jackson spoke to her again, Mahalia ignored him. He sat beside her, smoothing his hand over her short, dark hair, and waited.

Mackenzie had grown so tense by the time the phone rang that she jumped and shrieked when the ringer went off. Marcus started awake, but she ignored him as she dove for the phone and yanked the handset off the hook. “Kat? Did you find him? Is he okay?”

Silence met her words. “It’s me. I’m all right.”

“Jackson.” She sank back to the bed, her hands shaking with the force of her relief. “Are you okay? What happened? I tried to call—I tried to let you know, but Kat said you’d already gone to get me—”

“We went to Talbot’s estate,” he confirmed wearily. “Steven—he didn’t make it. Everyone else is fine.”

Her stomach twisted. “Oh, Jesus. What happened?” As she spoke, Marcus leaned up and watched her carefully.

“Talbot lost his shit, that’s what.” He spoke away from the phone, but she heard him clearly. “Have they gotten to New York yet?”

Nick answered him. “They’re half an hour out.”

A tiny bit of relief welled in her at the sound of that voice. “Nick’s okay?”

His voice came back on the line. “No one else got hurt. Just Steven. Mahalia...well, she’s in bad shape.”

Sympathy flooded her, followed by choking guilt. “God, I should have stayed, or found some way to contact you.” *He died for nothing.*

“It wasn’t your fault.” He sighed again. “Are you—is everything all right there?”

“I’m okay.” She glanced over her shoulder at Marcus, who had rolled over to face the wall and grant her the illusion of privacy. “Marcus got me out. He didn’t know what was going on, not really. Are you...?”

“We’re on our way to Boston now.”

She swallowed. “Kat told you where we are? You talked to her?”

“She called Nick’s father, and he gave us the details.” He sounded exhausted. “We’re headed there. Alec and Nick and I.”

“I’m so sorry, Jackson.” Mackenzie closed her eyes and tried to swallow around the guilt. “Poor Mahalia.”

“She went to New York with Nick’s sister. I think she’s going to stay there for tonight, see what the wolves plan on doing about tracking Talbot down.”

Mackenzie turned to look at Marcus again. “You heard all that?”

He didn’t turn over, just said quietly, “I heard.”

“Do you want me to ask them anything?”

It took him a moment to answer. “What did they do to Eddie?”

She lifted the phone again. “Marcus wants to know what happened to Eddie. He’s the shapeshifter.”

“Peyton took him back to New York. He’ll have to stand before the Conclave. They’ll decide what to do with him, I guess.”

Marcus’s shoulders tensed. “They might execute him.” It wasn’t a question.

Part of her—not a small part—thought Eddie deserved to stand trial for the things he’d done. Another part of her remembered the haunted way he’d looked at her, how he’d been just as trapped as she. “He could have stopped us, but he let us go, Jackson. He let us get away, and Charles could have killed him for it.”

“He almost did,” Jackson admitted. “The Conclave isn’t going to do anything rash, though. There’ll be time to give them the details of what happened.”

She asked because Marcus would want to know and wouldn’t ask himself. “Is Eddie okay?”

“He’s fine. Talbot knocked him into a wall, but he’s not hurt.” The phone beeped, and Jackson swore. “I have to go. My cell is dying. Stay in the hotel room, and don’t let anyone in. We’ll be there soon.”

“Okay. Be safe, Jackson. I’ll see you soon.”

“Yeah, Kenzie. You will.” The phone beeped again and clicked.

Mackenzie listened to the silence for a few tense seconds before dropping the receiver back in its cradle. She pulled her legs up on the bed and stared at Marcus’s back. “You heard him. Jackson said they’ll give Eddie a chance.”

“Yes.” Marcus glanced back over his shoulder and smiled weakly. “Thanks for asking after him.”

“You can talk to Nick when she gets here,” Mackenzie offered, struggling against the instinctive need to bridge the space between them, to comfort him. “She can help you. With her dad, I mean. She’s really nice.”

His expression didn’t change. “Yes, I’m sure she is.” There was no hint of sarcasm in his words. “But I have no claim on her assistance.”

She couldn’t take it anymore. His pain found an answering echo inside her, and she slipped off the bed and crossed the short distance to his. Energy prickled along her skin as she reached out and curled her fingers around his. “The way I figure, our fucked-up family history makes you the closest thing I’m ever going to have to a brother. So I’ll make claims for both of us, if you can help me deal with this whole turning-into-a-giant-cat thing.”

He squeezed her hand. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She dropped to the edge of the bed and bumped him with her elbow. “Scoot over. I’m too jittery to sleep, and I’m pretty sure it’s my right and duty as a bratty little sister to make you suffer with me.”

Marcus laughed as he complied. “Good luck explaining this to your boyfriend.”

Mackenzie stretched out next to him. “After all the leaps of faith I’ve made for him over the past week, I think he owes me one.” Her fingers tightened around Marcus’s hand. “Besides. I got the impression there aren’t a whole lot of us left. I still don’t understand it, Marcus. I mean, my instincts aren’t telling me to have your babies, but there’s this whole other...person. Creature. Something inside me, and she trusts you.”

“There aren’t many of us left,” he confirmed. “Perhaps no more than twenty in the country, now.”

She closed her eyes and asked the last question she wanted to hear the answer to. “You don’t want this plan, do you? I mean, do you think it’s your duty to have magical kids with me?”

She thought he might not answer. Finally, he sighed and pulled her closer with an arm around her shoulders. “No, I never really wanted it. I mean, you’re lovely, and I want to have children someday. I’m just not certain I want them to have the responsibility of saving the cougars.” He gave her a

wry look. “It hasn’t worked out so well for us, after all, has it?”

“It’s a lot to put on a kid,” she agreed quietly. “It was a lot to put on *you*. Too much. Maybe I’m lacking perspective because I’m so new to this, but... Well, it would be sad if the cougars disappeared, but is it somehow going to be better if the ones who are left half-kill themselves trying to stop it?”

“I don’t have any answers.” He lifted one shoulder in a tiny shrug. “If Charles could start over at this point, I think he would. But he’d have to find new parents, cast the necessary spells during pregnancy, and then wait for those children to grow up like us. He just doesn’t have time.”

She shivered. “I think you should go to New York. Go check on Eddie. Talk to the Conclave, tell them what you know. And...let us deal with the rest of it.” *Let us kill the only man who’s ever been a father to you.* It was the only way they’d be safe. She had no sympathy in her for Charles and his insanity, not after what he’d done to her parents, to Marcus’s parents, to *Steven*—

“If they’d allow me to speak, I’d like to.”

“We’ll find a way. When it’s all over, maybe you could help me learn how to deal with this stuff. How to understand what I’m feeling.”

“I can try.” He smiled again, and there was less pain in the expression. “It’s not like I have a lot of other things on my plate right now.”

“Sure you do. You get to decide what you want to do with your life. All those things you didn’t get to think about when you were responsible for the legacy of an entire race.”

“Funny,” he murmured, his eyes drifting shut. “This way seems a lot scarier.”

She stroked his cheek lightly and brushed a strand of dark hair away from his forehead, protective tenderness rising in her. “Yeah, I’m familiar with that feeling. But my friends are good people, Marcus. They’ll understand.” At least, she hoped they would. “They’ll help us both. We may be weirdly orphaned, big shapeshifting cats, but we’re not alone.”

He opened his eyes again, but didn’t look at her. “You’re not, anyway.”

Mackenzie considered saying something sympathetic. She considered trying to reassure him.

Instead she frowned and dug her elbow into his side. “Hey, I said you had me, and I meant it. If I can forgive you for chasing me through five cities and pretty much destroying my life, you can man up and forgive yourself. So stop whining and get ready to get your ass to New York so you can get your...friend back.” *Or whatever the hell Eddie is to you.*

He grunted. “Okay.” After a second, he rubbed his side. “That hurt.”

She choked on a laugh. “I guess I’m super strong now. It’s your fault for not teaching me how to avoid hurting people with it.”

“We can work on that too.”

“Mmm.” She closed her eyes to keep from checking the clock again. “Later. Go back to sleep, Marcus. I’m sure we’re not going to have a lot of time to sleep once they get here.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

She must have dozed off. She remembered staring at the wall and fighting the urge to check the clock a dozen times, but at some point she fell asleep, because she jerked awake when she heard the quiet knock at the door.

Marcus woke a second later, but she'd already tumbled off the bed, her attention focused on the door, on the familiar scent outside it and the soft sound of Nick's voice as she mumbled something.

"Mackenzie—"

She ignored Marcus's warning and bolted to the door, her hands shaking as she tore at the chain lock. "It's them, I can hear them, I can smell them—" *Oh God, and that might be the most disturbing thing ever.*

But it didn't matter. She clawed at the lock and yanked open the door. Jackson stood there, looking bone-weary but relieved to see her. She ignored everyone else and flung herself at him, winding her arms around him as she nuzzled her face against his neck.

“Kenzie.” His arms locked around her, and he lifted her off her feet. “Are you okay?” He spoke quietly but urgently. “Are you really okay?”

“I am now.” She whispered the words against his jaw and dragged her head back so she could stare at him. “Are you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I think so.” He looked past her and his face hardened. “Marcus Foster, I guess.”

“That’s him,” Nick confirmed. “We met several years ago.”

Marcus straightened his shirt and took a deep breath. “I remember. Hello.”

“Jackson.” She tightened her fingers in his hair and forced his gaze back to her. “Don’t. He had no idea what was going on. When he found out, he risked his life to get me out.”

Nick stepped past them both and favored Marcus with a small smile and an outstretched hand. “Call me Nick. Want to go downstairs for a drink with me and Alec?”

Marcus cleared his throat. “Mackenzie?”

She turned her head and met his eyes, recognizing the nervousness and indecision, and underneath the slightest bit of protective concern. “Nick will take care of you.” Her cheeks heated, but it didn’t stop her. “Did you guys get a room? Jackson and I need to talk, I think.”

Nick coughed. “We will be on an entirely different floor. Trust me on that.”

Oh, yeah. She was blushing now. A different heat curled through her, spurred on by the proximity of Jackson's body and sheer, giddy relief at having him safe in her arms. "Okay. Yeah, you can go with them, Marcus. I'll be okay." *I'll be wonderful. I'll be perfect.*

Marcus nodded and grabbed his shoes. "I'll be at the bar or—or wherever." He hurried to follow Nick and slammed the door behind him.

Mackenzie drew in a breath and turned back to meet Jackson's eyes again. "I think they think I'm going to—"

"Yeah." He rubbed his forehead and sighed. "We need to talk about what's happened, I guess."

"God, Jackson." She stepped forward and curled her arms around him, soothed instinctively by the warmth of his body and the steady beat of his heart. Holding him felt different now, probably because of the senses she couldn't control yet. The jumble of scents was hard to sort through, but the sharp, metallic smell of blood was unmistakable, and it made her tense. "Promise me you're okay, first."

"What? Oh. It's not my blood." His fingers wove into her hair, and his eyes darkened. "I can't talk about it right now. If I start thinking about it..."

"Shh." She kissed the pulse beating too fast in his neck. "We're here. We're safe. We can talk later. We *have* a later now—"

His mouth cut off the rest of her words, and he lifted her again. When he lowered her this time, she felt the softness of the bed against her back. His lips stayed on hers, coaxing and caressing. His tongue traced the corner of her mouth and dove inside to stroke over her teeth and tongue.

He kissed her with an expertise that set her heart to racing and shot heat through her. There was nothing slow or tentative about his kiss, nothing of the shy, cautious gentleman who'd taken such pains not to cross any lines before. His tongue teased at hers until she moaned in pleasure, and he responded by easing one thigh between hers and rocking against her.

Finally, he raised his head. "I've been wanting to do that for days."

Mackenzie panted for breath as she slid her hands into his hair. "Only days?"

Jackson kissed the inside of her wrist and chuckled. "Since the last time I saw you. I'm pretty sure I had already told you how much I wanted to kiss you before that."

"The last time you saw me, I was half naked and getting the hell kissed out of me." She rocked her hips, rubbing against his thigh with a soft moan. "God damn it, Jackson, if you tell me you're not going to violate me in about ten different ways, I'm going to use my newly discovered superstrength to kick your *ass*."

“You were *mostly* naked,” he corrected. His hand eased under her shirt, and a crooked smile curved his lips. “I remember it pretty damn clearly.”

She shivered as his fingers traced a slow path up her side, but when he inched the shirt higher she remembered why she wasn’t wearing a bra—and why she was in sweats and an oversized shirt. “Shit. The clothes. They’re warded or something. So Talbot couldn’t find us. Will they still work if I take them off?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Hell if I know, baby. We can keep the shirt, though, just to be safe.”

Mackenzie hissed her frustration, yanked at his shirt and froze when the sound of tearing fabric filled the room. Heat flooded her cheeks and she squeezed her eyes shut. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

His shoulders shook, and it took her a minute to realize he was laughing. “Do I need to worry about particularly cherished body parts, Kenzie?” Affection and desire colored his voice, made it husky and low.

“Maybe,” she retorted, tugging on his shirt more gently this time. She worked her hands under it and slid them across the warm skin of his back, thrilled by the play of strong muscles under skin. “Turns out you’re going to be the first man I have sex with now that I’ve got all my super powers.

Maybe you should restrain me so I don't injure you by mistake."

He leaned up and tugged the shirt over his head. "Left my handcuffs at home. I'll just have to take my chances." When he moved again, he stretched out on the bed beside her and toyed with the waistband of her sweats.

Mackenzie turned over and gave in to the temptation to press her mouth to his bare chest. Her fingers found his waist and she curled her hand around it as she kissed her way to his collarbone and down. "Foreplay," she whispered before circling her tongue teasingly around his nipple. "I want a lot of it."

Jackson hissed in a breath and tangled his fingers in her hair. "I thought I did an okay job last time."

"Yeah. *You* did an okay job." She scored his nipple with her teeth before swiping her tongue over it again. "Actually you did a pretty damn amazing job. But I didn't get much of a chance."

He moaned softly and held her mouth to his skin. "If it's that important to you, I promise to let you make it up to me now."

She kissed her way across his chest and paid the same attention to his other nipple, unbelievably turned on by the way she could hear his heart pounding in his chest. He wanted

her with the same fervor that she wanted him. About that, at least, there could be no doubt.

So she took her time. She teased across his chest with her tongue and nipped at his skin, enjoying every low moan and the way his fingers tightened in her hair when she found a particularly sensitive spot. She worked her way back to his shoulders and she slid over him, straddling his hips and rocking. “You feel so damn good.”

His hands framed her hips and drew her down against him, harder and slower. “I am *really* hating that shirt right now,” he rasped.

She sucked in a breath and fought the urge to tear the shirt off. “Maybe it’ll be fine on the bed next to us. Or under us.” She curled her fingers around his hand and coaxed it under the shirt. “Or we can just be creative.”

Jackson rolled her onto her back and pushed the dark fabric past her breasts. “Like I said, I’ll work around it.” He bent his head, barely brushing his lips over one of her nipples.

The teasing touch wasn’t nearly enough. She shoved her fingers back into his hair and arched her back in silent plea. He answered it by opening his mouth and curling his tongue around the taut peak.

She slid her leg over his hip and ground against him, the hard length of his erection making her weak with need. “You need less clothing.”

He raised his head and flashed her another slow grin. “Do I?” Without waiting for her to answer, he rose from the bed and stared at her. “I guess I can get rid of my clothes. They’re not magic, or anything.”

Mackenzie sat and wiggled to the edge of the bed. She dropped her feet to the floor and grinned at him. “Plenty of magic between the two of us. Though I wouldn’t mind seeing any interesting tricks you have. Ones that don’t involve you being invisible.”

His smile turned to laughter. “I usually keep those out of the bedroom, but I do have some more mundane ones up my sleeve.”

She brushed her fingers over his. “I don’t doubt that for a second.”

Jackson’s laughter died as he slipped his fingers into her hair and tilted her face up. “I think we’ve talked enough, baby.”

She let her gaze drift down and back up again, drinking in the sight of his lean, hard body. When her eyes met his she let her fingers follow, sliding them over warm skin and tracing the lines of his muscles. “I hope you’re not done talking.” She smoothed her hands back down his stomach to the buckle of his belt. “Your voice is the sexiest damn thing I’ve ever heard.”

When he spoke, that voice was decidedly huskier. “I’ll keep that in mind.” His hands covered hers, strong and gentle. Together, they loosened his buckle and freed the leather. The sound of his heart, beating hard and fast in his chest, filled her ears, tangled up with the sound of her own shallow breathing.

The button on his jeans popped free and she nearly moaned as she shifted her hand down. Her fingers found his rigid cock through the rough denim, and she glanced back at him, watching his face as she traced her fingers along his erection in a teasing caress.

He squeezed his eyes shut and swayed as a tortured groan ripped free of his throat. “We won’t be taking our time if you keep that up, darlin’.”

She curled her fingers around the zipper and tugged, and the rasping sound of it filled the room as she dragged the zipper carefully over the hard bulge. He groaned again, the sound filling her ears, and Mackenzie struggled to breathe as he filled her newly enhanced senses. It was overwhelming, hearing his excitement and smelling his raw, masculine scent mixed with her own arousal.

Instinctive desires rose in her, odd and unfamiliar but powerful. She pressed her face to his stomach without thought, rubbing her cheek against his skin as she breathed in the scent that was uniquely his. “This is different. I want things—”

Jackson ran his hands down her arms and urged her to her feet. “What kinds of things?” he asked gently, his lips following the line of her jaw. “Tell me.”

Her head fell back, and she felt a rush of pleasure when his mouth brushed over her throat. “I don’t have words for it...”

“The instinctive things? I know about some of them. No actual experience, though.” His voice was low and vibrated against her neck. His teeth scraped her skin, closing lightly, and her knees gave out as primal satisfaction thundered through her. Only the firm pressure of his hands under her elbows kept her upright.

She whimpered and rubbed her body against his, desperate to feel him against her, to have his scent on her skin. The presence of her shirt, bespelled or not, was so aggravating she snarled as she tangled her fingers in it and jerked. “Next time we’re doing this naked.”

Jackson caught her hands and pulled them away from the shirt. “Stop doubting my creativity.”

His hands crept under the fabric, smoothing over her skin, and she moaned her satisfaction when his fingers teased over her painfully tight nipples. “I think I’m losing it,” she whispered as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “I just *want*.”

“Shh.” He pushed her pants down, kneeling as he guided the heavy fleece down her legs. “You don’t have to explain it. Just show me what you need.” He drew his tongue slowly over the swell of her hip. “Show me.”

Her knees were too wobbly to hold her upright. She sank back onto the bed and threaded her fingers through his hair. “Touch me.”

He grinned and slid his hand up her body to cover her breast again, squeezing the nipple lightly between his fingers. “Like that?”

“Yes.” She sucked in a breath and parted her knees, tugging at him until his body was wedged between her legs. Her body hummed with pleasure, pleasure that pooled low in her abdomen in a growing ache. “More. God, *more*.”

He dropped his mouth to her thigh and kissed a path over her skin. “Show me.”

Mackenzie whimpered and flopped back against the bed. Half-formed visions filled her head, visions of Jackson above her, watching her as he thrust slowly into her body. Sweet, tender, gentle lovemaking.

The image disappeared, replaced with one of her on her hands and knees, arching her back in barely contained pleasure as his fingers curled around her hips and he slid into her. A little rough, passionate, primal as he claimed her—

She groaned and tightened her fingers. “The cat wants to go fast and hard. She needs it.”

He pressed his cheek against her belly as his fingers slid between her thighs, his thumb caressing her in slow circles. “Does that mean now?”

Yes. She pressed her hips against his hand with a throaty little moan as his touch made her body weak. “I need it,” she said again, her voice a hoarse whisper. “But I don’t want it to be over.”

He pulled his hand away. “We’ll do it again.” Even as he spoke, he dragged his wallet out of his back pocket and dug through it. “And maybe again, just because.”

“Yes.” She sat up, so fast she almost crashed her head into his chest. Her hands fumbled at his pants and she tugged them open as he rifled through his wallet. “We’ll try everything. Just so I know what I really want.”

Jackson managed to tear open the condom wrapper right around the time she pushed his jeans and underwear down his hips. “Good idea. Experimentation.”

Heat pulsed through her at the sight of his cock. She curled her fingers around it and stroked once from the base to the head, satisfaction flooding her when he groaned. She did it again and lifted her gaze to his. “What are we doing first?”

He handed her the condom, and guided her hands and the latex over his erection. Instead of answering, he moved back

and pulled her off the bed to turn her over it. “Making the cat happy.” His hips rubbed against her ass, his chest to her back.

It felt right, and not just to the animal inside her. Mackenzie shivered, loving the heat she could feel from his body in spite of the damned shirt, and loving even more the feeling of being surrounded by him. She twisted her head to the side and pressed her cheek to his chin as she rocked back. “Yes...please, baby...*please*.”

He nudged her legs farther apart. His cock bumped against her and slid inside, a long, hot draw of sensation magnified by his low curse and the bite of his teeth on the back of her neck.

Her fingernails scratched against the bedspread and she choked on a cry of pleasure as something primal and instinctive roared through her. The sound of tearing fabric filled the air, and she lifted her head and stared at the torn bedspread. “F-fuck.” A tiny thread of fear uncurled inside her, making the pleasure and anticipation that much sharper. “Don’t let me hurt you.”

His hands trailed down her arms to her wrists, and he pinned them to the bed as he drew back and thrust into her again. She could have easily shaken him off, but the cat wasn’t interested in fighting. Not with Jackson.

She’d never been this aroused in her life, with the exception of the terrifying car trip to Boca Raton. But this was

a different sort of need, one that spiraled dizzily higher when he pulled away and tightened around her when he pushed back in. “More.” The word spilled from her as she rocked her hips into his next thrust. “*More.*”

Jackson’s lips pressed to her ear, his breath hot against her skin. Instead of speaking, he bit her again, drawing the delicate lobe between his teeth. He let go of her wrists and wrapped his fingers around her hips, pulling her into his slow, forceful thrusts.

Release started somewhere deep inside her, a frantic urgency for something just out of reach. Her moans turned to gasping whimpers as she curled her hands in the bedspread again and writhed beneath him. His fingers dug into her hips harder, lifting her a tiny bit. His next thrust gave her what she needed, scraped every hungry nerve inside her and she threw her head back against his shoulder with a low cry.

Hot, heavy pleasure burst through her, spiraling out in waves that grew stronger as he slammed into her. She cried out again, her voice loud and ragged as she felt her body tighten around him, spasming with the force of her climax.

His own cry was hoarse and strained, loud but still lost in the blood pounding in her ears. His hips snapped against her ass once more, and he shuddered, his cock swelling and throbbing inside her.

Fabric gave way under her clutching hands, and she slumped against the bed and panted for breath as the shuddering pleasure cascading through her slowly began to fade.

Jackson leaned over her, his chest to her back, his arms curled under her shoulders. "I'll move in a minute," he panted. "I just...need a minute."

A laugh bubbled out of her, low and warm. "Baby, you can stay there as long as you want."

He snorted. "People are going to make themselves scarce tonight, but they'll come busting in here tomorrow morning."

"Mmm..." She was sure she was supposed to care about that. She arched and rubbed her back against his chest. "You mean they won't be expecting to find us like this?"

He bit her again, this time on the back of the shoulder. "Nick might. Alec? He wouldn't dare come in."

Mackenzie turned her head and kissed the side of his jaw. "So we separate eventually," she murmured. "Sometime before dawn."

He stood, trailing a hand down her side. "Crawl under the covers, and I'll be right back."

Mackenzie listened to him moving about in the bathroom as she crawled under the bedspread. Her knees felt weak, but the instincts that had been screaming so loudly ten minutes ago were silent.

The bedding had seen better days, though. She snuggled down and tried to ignore the fact that she'd torn a foot-long hole in it. *Just be glad you weren't clutching at anything breakable—or irreplaceable.*

When Jackson came padding out of the bathroom, completely at ease with his nakedness, he eyed the ripped fabric in bemusement. "We did a number on this thing, didn't we?"

"We?" She raised an eyebrow and tugged down the other side of the bedspread in invitation. "We might need to watch what I'm holding on to during sex in the near future. At least until I get used to the fact that I can break headboards with my bare hands."

"I'm sure there's advice to be found out there." He climbed up beside her. "Mostly for new werewolves, but that's not much different from your situation now."

Mackenzie traced idle patterns over his chest as she listened to his heart rate slowly return to normal. "That guy I met at the bar. Derek? You said he was changed, right?"

"Yeah, a couple of years ago. Alec helped him out a lot. He could probably get you two talking." His eyes drifted shut, and he laughed. "Or you could be sneaky and get Nick to do it."

"Yeah, that'd be smooth." She settled her head on his shoulder. "'Hey, Nick...I was hoping I could talk to your hot

crush about sex and how not to break one's partner by mistake.' That should go over well."

Another laugh rumbled through his chest. "Might get things moving with those two." His expression turned serious. "I could ask Alec. His wife was human."

That brought Mackenzie up short. She propped her head up and frowned at Jackson. "Alec had a wife? A human wife?"

"Yeah." He ran a hand through her hair. "She was murdered."

That explained a lot about Alec's demeanor. "Jesus. What happened?"

It took Jackson a minute to answer. When he did, he spoke quietly. "Someone shot her. Alec went to Mahalia for help finding out who did it, and she sent him to me. We tracked down the killer, and we've been working together ever since."

Which sounded simple and pat and well rehearsed...and like a bunch of bullshit. "Jackson." She didn't say anything else, just his name, but she watched his face and waited for the truth.

Jackson opened his eyes and met her stare. "The shooter was one of his cousins, Kenzie. Is that the part you wanted to know?"

"Why?"

He rubbed his face. “I told you why. You’ve seen why. It’s the reason Nick’s never done anything but stare at Gabriel when she thinks he’s not looking. The reason Charles fucking Talbot killed people to get to you. Why he’ll keep doing it unless we find him and stop him.” He eased out from under her and sat. “They have to keep the lines pure. For some, all they want are shifter babies. But in Nick’s case—and Alec’s—it means old blood.”

Mackenzie stared at his back and fought a shiver. “People would kill you for being with me.”

“Maybe,” he admitted. “There aren’t a lot of cougars left. Even if we stop Talbot, I can’t tell you another cougar won’t show up, trying to convince you to have a couple of babies with him.” He turned and fixed her with a serious look. “It’s about survival, and that’s one hell of a motivator.”

The thought made her queasy. She closed her eyes and tried to breathe normally. Tried not to panic. “Is that what the rest of my life is going to be? People who only care about how many babies they can get out of me? People who would kill for it?”

Jackson leaned over her, laying his hand on her cheek. “What happened to Alec and his wife isn’t commonplace. The rest of his family may not have approved of her, but they were horrified by what his cousin did.” He rubbed his thumb over her lips. “But I’d be lying if I said it couldn’t happen.”

She studied his face. The strong jaw, the lips that smiled so readily, the impossibly blue eyes that made her heart beat too fast. She swallowed and turned her face to his hand to kiss his palm. “I don’t think I could handle it if someone tried to hurt you just because you’re with me.”

“Don’t I get to decide if I can handle the risk?”

“Can you? I don’t mean—I’m not asking if you’re willing to. I mean, can you handle it if someone comes after you? Can you keep yourself safe? You’re not human, but...” She thought of the torn bedspread and how easily the fabric had ripped under her hands. What could she do to a human if she tried? What *couldn’t* she do?

“You don’t have to worry about me, baby.” The corner of his mouth curled up. “I can hold my own. My interesting tricks, remember?”

“Is it worth it?” Hesitation uncurled inside her. “Is that a risk you want to handle?”

His smile widened, and her heart stuttered when he tilted up her chin and kissed her softly. “Not much could make me happier right now.”

It felt wrong to be so happy with the world falling apart around her, but she slid her hands into Jackson’s hair and kissed him, hard. She traced her tongue along his lips and pushed inside, moaning softly as she urged him to reciprocate,

as she begged him to show her that it was enough, she was enough—that *they* were enough, together.

Jackson groaned deep in his chest and curled his tongue around hers. His hand, solid and warm, drifted down her body, coming to rest on her hip. Otherwise, he did nothing but touch his mouth to hers, exploring with excruciating slowness.

With the cat sated, Mackenzie was free to melt into the pleasure of being so skillfully kissed. Arousal unfurled inside her again, slow and patient as the heat between them built. She made another noise as his tongue caressed hers, something that sounded more like a whimper than a moan.

He bit her chin and raised his head. “Are you exhausted?”

She didn’t think it would be possible to feel exhausted, not with him staring at her with such obvious, sensual intent. Her breath caught and she stroked her hand down the back of his neck and along his shoulder. “No, but I haven’t been driving all day. Are *you* exhausted?”

“Not yet.” The words were heavy with promise. “Ask me in an hour.”

Her breathing hitched again and she froze. “Wait. I don’t want to hurt you, and I have no idea how to control it.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I don’t really think we have to worry too much about it. I’m pretty sturdy.”

The bedspread looked pretty sturdy too. But she smiled and lifted her fingers to his lips. “Okay. If I start to think I’m

going to lose it, I'll just clutch the headboard and hope Marcus brought enough to cover the damage we're going to do to this place."

Jackson pulled her hands away and urged them toward the plain wooden headboard. "I did." He tugged her shirt aside and traced his tongue over her collarbone as his fingers unbuttoned the top three buttons on her shirt.

She sighed in pleasure and curled her fingers around the wood. "This'll do for now, but I really want to learn how to deal with this so I can explore."

"Unless you want to go drink daiquiris and chat in the hotel bar, we're on our own tonight, darlin'."

As if they were leaving the room. "I was thinking more about later. You know, in a couple of weeks, when I can let you out of my sight again."

One more button and the shirt gaped open just enough to bare her breasts. He smiled and barely skated his tongue around each of her nipples before speaking again. "You're not even going to let me work?"

The wood under her fingers creaked, and she sucked in a sharp breath and tried not to arch into him. "Not if we could be doing this."

He hummed in answer as he captured her nipple in his mouth and laved it with his tongue. He edged her knees apart and reached down to stroke the inside of her thigh.

She did arch up this time, struggling against the urge to drop her hand to the back of his head. “Christ!” He just moved his hand higher, until his fingers slicked against her, seeking.

“Jackson.” She tore one hand from the headboard and reached for the back of his head. “Come here, I want to...I need—”

He raised his head, grinning, but the heat in his gaze seared her. “I thought you were going to crush the headboard and not my neck.”

She whimpered and rocked her hips into his slow caress, her other hand falling to the bed sheets. “Do you have a plan of action, or are you just seeing how crazy you can make me?”

“I thought that *was* a valid plan of action.”

His fingers brushed a gentle, teasing circle, and she moaned. “*Jackson!*”

One of his fingers slipped inside her. “Mackenzie.”

The headboard creaked again, more alarmingly this time. “If I can’t touch you, at least let me *kiss* you.”

He bent until his lips hovered a mere inch over hers. “You want a kiss? Take it.”

Mackenzie groaned and chased after his lips, seizing them in a blistering kiss. She poured everything into it, her desperate need to touch him, her arousal and passion, even the tiny fluttering warmth inside her that whispered insane things about love.

Jackson coaxed her mouth open wider, made her lips and tongue tingle, and his hand moved against her. When he thrust a second finger in, her arousal spiked. She tore her mouth from his, kissed his jaw and nuzzled his neck. “Mine.” It was almost a question, a testing to see how he’d respond.

He raised his free hand and twisted it into her hair, holding her mouth closer to his skin. “Yes.”

Satisfaction thrilled through her, more powerful than the pleasure from his maddening touch. She licked the pulse pounding in his throat and closed her teeth gently over it.

He answered her claim with a soft groan. “You have no idea how messed up I was while you were gone, Kenzie.”

“I’m here.” She dropped her head back to the bed as he brought his thumb up to rub dizzying circles in counterpoint to the thrusts of his fingers. Her entire body tightened, barreling toward release so fast it stole her breath. “God, *God*, I’m going to—”

“Yes.” His mouth found her neck, and he echoed her action by sinking his teeth into her skin as she arched her hips into his touch. It wasn’t gentle—it almost hurt—but it twisted something inside her, something primal. Something needy.

It burst the dam, sending pleasure sliding through her in a scalding wave that curled her toes and tightened her fingers around the headboard until she swore it would bear the imprint of her fingers. She choked on a scream and scrambled to

clutch at the bedspread as he coaxed the wave to crest again with nothing but his skillful fingers and his mouth on her throat.

He crushed his mouth to hers as he moved over her but froze between her legs. “Dammit. My wallet...”

Mackenzie fought a brief inner battle even as her hips pushed against him. The woman won out, and she groaned and squeezed her eyes shut. “I haven’t exactly been picking up my birth control prescription on the run.”

“So I figured.” He panted and rolled away to reach over the edge of the bed. Finally, he made a triumphant noise and sat up, condom in hand. “Got one.”

“Then get *back* here.” She plucked the condom from his fingers, tearing it open with hands that shook. “You’re making me a little crazy, Jackson Holt.”

He stretched out on the sheets and watched her, one hand on her thigh. “So my evil plan to tease and torment has worked.”

The shaking in her hands only increased as she smoothed the condom on, teasing her fingers down his erection until he thrust against her hands. She sucked in a breath and pulled back. “Sit up. Against the headboard.”

He obeyed and gripped her hips as she climbed over him. “We seem to be doing okay without the shapeshifter-sex crash course,” he noted. “Maybe you should *try* holding on to me.”

“Maybe.” The thought of hurting him made it hard to concentrate. She curled her fingers around the headboard on either side of his shoulders and brushed her lips over his as she lifted her hips. “But this is nice too.”

He framed her face with his hands and smiled gently. “Yeah. This is nice too.”

She wanted to go fast, to slam her hips against his and drive them both over the edge. Instead she savored the feeling as he slid inside her, digging her teeth into her lower lip as she lowered herself. She fought the urge to close her eyes and focused on his face instead, on the way he watched her, like there was no one outside their room. No one else in the world.

His head thumped against the headboard, and he ran his hands around to splay across her back. “Jesus Christ.”

“Yeah.” She sank down the last few inches and clutched at the headboard as the feelings intensified. She lowered her mouth to his throat, and licked across his pulse and up to his ear. “This is perfect.”

“Mmm.” His big hands urged her closer, until her mostly bare breasts pressed tightly to the wall of his chest. “I can already tell... Slow sex is going to be a tough one for us.”

Slow was impossible at the moment. Mackenzie rocked her hips and moaned. “Maybe later, when we’ve had lots of practice.”

Jackson's breath came in short, labored pants, and she could tell he was struggling for control. "You have some of the best damn ideas, darlin'."

She rubbed her cheek against his. "Tell me what you want."

"I want all of you," he whispered. "I want to make you come."

"Again?" She closed her eyes and savored the friction of their bodies rubbing together as she moved against him. "Greedy."

"Lust and avarice," he agreed. His hands dropped to her hips and dragged her down more sharply. "My only vices."

She gasped and let her head fall back. Her fingers tightened on the headboard and she quickened her pace. "Help me. Come with me."

A short, harsh curse was his only answer. He guided her hips, thrusting up harder when she lowered her body to his. Passion and pleasure mounted, and a light sheen of sweat dampened Jackson's skin. "Shit," he hissed. "Baby—"

She barely heard him. Blood pounded in her ears and she ground down, chasing the release that trembled just out of reach. He thrust into her one last time and the world flew apart. She cried out as everything faded but his body inside hers and the sounds and scents of pleasure and release.

Jackson's fingers clenched on her hips, holding her as he stiffened and shuddered. His rasping, desperate groan tickled her ears and shivered up her spine. Then he relaxed, dropping his forehead to her shoulder.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she mirrored him, nuzzling her face into his neck. "Jackson. God."

His chest heaved at first and settled into a steady rhythm as he slowly caught his breath. "Yeah."

She inhaled deeply. "Maybe I need to put the magical pants back on."

"Would that involve getting out of this bed?"

Mackenzie couldn't remember where the pants had ended up, or how many pieces they'd been in at the time. "Maybe it's not that important."

He raised his head and sighed regretfully. "I think it probably is."

"Okay, except I don't know if I can move. My knees aren't feeling all that solid."

Jackson lifted her off his body with a grin and laid her gently on the bed beside him. He paused by the bed and found her pants. "Here. Now you don't have to move." He brushed a kiss over her forehead and headed for the bathroom.

There was so much to talk about. So much to *say*, not just about what she'd gone through, but what had happened at the mansion. Mackenzie wiggled into the warded pants and

rebuttoned the oversized shirt before curling up again with her head on the plush pillows. Too much to say...and all she wanted to do was snuggle into Jackson's arms and sleep. Even knowing intellectually that the danger was far from past...

He padded quietly out of the bathroom and warmth flooded her. She felt safe with him. She felt peaceful now that he was here with her, now that *he* was safe. After the past week of terror, she was so giddy with the sudden relief that she felt light-headed.

He stopped and frowned at her as he reached for his underwear. "Are you feeling okay? You look a little spun."

"I feel like we should be getting dressed and going to find everyone else. Like we need to be making plans or something." She inched over as he slid into the bed next to her. "But I'm so tired, and I feel safe now."

"We can go downstairs," he offered. "Or we can sleep. Trust me when I say Nick and Alec aren't expecting to see us until breakfast."

"But everything that happened..." Her protest sounded weak, even to her own ears. She didn't *want* to go anywhere. "I guess we can wait to talk to them. I couldn't process much right now anyway."

"We can talk about it later. Everything, Mackenzie. Just...later."

Later. She closed her eyes and rested her head on his shoulder. His body felt warm, strong. Perfect. *We'll talk about it later.*

As reprieves went it wasn't much, but it was something. Enough. *Whatever comes tomorrow, I won't have to face it alone.*

Chapter Twenty-Three

“That’s when we found out you and Marcus had already hightailed it out of there.” Jackson stalled by pouring cream in his coffee and reaching for another muffin. He didn’t want to burden Mackenzie with the details of what came next. “So Charles tossed Marcus’s friend into the wall and shot Steven.”

Mackenzie’s face tightened, and her hands shook as she lowered her teacup to the table. “I should have found a way to contact you. I should have found a way. It was for nothing.”

“If I’m not allowed to blame myself for dragging everyone else into this, neither are you.” He fixed her with a serious stare. “I’m not kidding, Kenzie. Stop saying it. Stop thinking it.”

She swallowed. “It’s so much pain and death over me. Because of me. I know it’s not my fault, that I didn’t ask for it—”

“No, you didn’t.” *None of us did.* “Steven knew he probably wasn’t going to make it out of there. He felt responsible for Charles’s actions, and he was willing to risk

his life to stop him.” He reached over and squeezed her hand.
“So we’re going to do it for him.”

She squeezed back. “You think we can?”

I think we have to. “If we can find him.”

“We can—” She paused and tilted her head to the side.
“Nick’s coming. Well, I suppose everyone’s coming, but I can hear Nick.”

Jackson looked up in time to see Nick and Alec walk through the dining room door, arguing, with Marcus close behind.

“Just admit you were pissed off about it,” Nick demanded.

“There was nothing to be pissed off about.”

“Except for the fact that Marcus had more women crawling on him, and you can’t stand that.”

“Honey, if you think I’m that insecure, you haven’t been paying attention.”

She groaned and snatched an apple from the glass bowl on the table as Alec jerked out the chair next to Mackenzie’s.
“How exhausting is it, Alec, carrying around that ego?”

Alec scrubbed a hand over his face. “A lot less exhausting than listening to you bitch all the time.”

Jackson sighed. “If you two keep bickering like this, people are going to think you’re having sex.”

Alec laughed and scooted over so Marcus could slide another chair in next to his. “Only people who don’t have to watch her lovesick puppy routine around Derek.”

Nick sat beside Jackson and shrugged. “Whatever, Jacobson. You already spilled the beans. The man *loves* me.”

“Uh-huh. God help him.” Alec leaned forward and stole Jackson’s coffee. “So, Casanova, have we got a plan?”

“We go home. We look for him, and we get ready.” What he didn’t say, what Alec already knew, was that they wouldn’t find Charles Talbot if he wanted to hide. They *couldn’t*.

But he would come to them.

“What about Mahalia? Is she staying in New York?”

“Far as I know.” Mahalia didn’t particularly want to see any of them, and he didn’t blame her.

Mackenzie spoke, her tone oddly protective. “Marcus wants to go to New York. Can you arrange for him to meet with your father, Nick? Maybe he can answer some of your sister’s questions about Charles.”

She smiled. “Sure. Marcus mentioned something about it last night. I’m going to call Daddy this morning.”

Marcus nodded. “Nick thinks her father can help me talk to the Conclave about Eddie.”

“Right.” Nick twisted the stem from her apple. “I’m going to call Ronnie Coleman, too. She mediates for the Conclave, but I think she’d be interested in Eddie’s case.”

“Good.” Mackenzie squeezed Marcus’s shoulder lightly. “They can protect him, right? I mean, in case—in case anyone comes after him?”

Nick barked out a laugh. “Charles Talbot’s crazy, but he’s not crazy enough to try waltzing through the Conclave. Though we’d all be lucky if he tried it. They’d eat him alive.”

Jackson nodded. “Marcus would be a guest, entitled to every protection. They’d guard his life with theirs.”

“Good,” Mackenzie said again. “We can call you if we have questions, but you need to go and make sure Eddie’s okay.”

Jackson watched as Marcus smiled at her. “Thank you, Mackenzie. For everything.”

She shrugged and reached for her teacup. “So we’re going home. I don’t know what else to do.”

Jackson tightened his fingers around hers. “Home. We’ll figure something out.”

Mackenzie nodded. “We’ll figure something out.”

Alec finished the cup of coffee he’d stolen from Jackson and picked up a muffin. “We flying? We lost the posh private jet.”

“I could get it back,” Nick offered, “but it’d be faster to fly commercial.”

“Then that’s the plan.” Jackson eyed Marcus appraisingly. “Do you need us to make arrangements to get you to New York?”

“No, I can get there, as long as someone will let me see Eddie when I do.”

“Nick’ll take care of it.” Alec rose with his muffin in one hand and dug his cell phone out with the other. “I’m going to book a flight.”

“Business class, at least.” Nick shot him a warning look. “Don’t cheap out on us.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Alec grinned at Jackson. “I’ll be in room five-twenty. Meet me up there when y’all are done eating.”

Jackson waved a hand. “What are you going to do when we get back to New Orleans, Kenzie?”

She shrugged. “I want to figure out a way to fight, but I don’t know what to do. He’s so powerful. That magic... Is there anything he can’t do with it? How am I supposed to—”

“You’re not,” Jackson interrupted, crumpling his napkin in his free hand. “*We* are. We’ll find a way. Together.”

Mackenzie squeezed his hand but looked at Marcus. “He’s going to come after me, isn’t he? He’s not going to give up.”

“He’s traded everything for this. His life, his family. Even his sanity.” He clasped his hands on the table and frowned at them. “Giving up isn’t an option.”

The hair on the back of Jackson's neck rose, and he thumped the table near Marcus's hands. "Hey. Don't even think about it. Not alone."

Marcus shot him an irritated, defiant look. "The man raised me, and I never even—"

"Not alone," Jackson repeated firmly. "Nobody is going after him solo. All you'll do is get yourself killed." *Oh, you're terribly reasonable, aren't you, Holt? Now that he doesn't have your girlfriend?* He ignored the voice and glanced at Nick. "Help me out here."

She patted Marcus's hands. "He's serious. Besides, you'd be better off helping your friend—and my father—in New York. Really, Marcus."

Mackenzie curled her free hand over Marcus's arm. "The man raised you, Marcus. That's *why* you never thought he was doing anything wrong. But you didn't ignore the truth when you saw it. You found out what was going on and you did your best to make it right. That's all anyone has a right to ask of you, and I'll kick your ass if you do something stupid."

"All right." He sighed and smiled. "I'd better go make my own arrangements to leave. Goodbye, Mackenzie."

"You have Nick's number? And Jackson's?" She sounded like a worried mother letting her child out of her sight for the first time. "In case anything happens, you should have both."

Marcus rolled his eyes, but his smile didn't fade. "I have everyone's numbers. I'll be okay."

"Okay." She leaned over to give Marcus a slightly awkward hug. "Just...be careful, okay? You owe me a lot of help with this whole giant-cat thing."

"I suppose I do, at that." He rose and saluted Nick. "I'll be in touch."

She sprang out of her chair and hugged him quickly. "Come to New Orleans when you can. We can go out without Alec this time. We'll have more fun."

Marcus offered his hand, and Jackson shook it firmly. "Thank you for what you did for Mackenzie. I'll remember."

Marcus nodded. "So will I." He waved and walked away.

Mackenzie watched him go, an odd look on her face. When Jackson slipped back into his chair, she sighed. "I know it's stupid to feel guilty, but I turned his life upside-down."

"*Charles* turned his life upside-down." Jackson picked up his empty coffee cup and set it down again. "Ready to head out? Depending on what Alec books, we've probably got a long day of traveling ahead of us."

"Yeah. I suppose we do." She shoved away her teacup and reached for the last muffin in the bowl. "Am I going to be stuck in these clothes indefinitely?"

Nick wrinkled her nose. "I hope not. You're going to burn up in fleece."

“No.” Jackson shook his head. “It wouldn’t make much sense to hide you from him when he’d have to know you’re with us.”

“As soon as we get back to New Orleans, we’ll take care of it. Give me five minutes, and I’ll have you looking like a star,” Nick promised, grabbing another apple. “Want to head up?”

“Yeah.” Mackenzie rose to her feet. “Let’s go home.”

Home. Jackson put a protective hand on the small of her back. “That’s the best damn thing I’ve heard all week.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jackson passed Alec the last bag from the trunk and pulled his ringing phone from his pocket. “Kat. Is there a problem?”

“I take it you haven’t listened to my five frantic messages?”

“My battery’s almost dead,” he told her, alarmed. “What’s wrong?”

She sounded more aggravated than afraid, but it was hard to tell for sure with Derek’s annoyed voice in the background. “Someone broke into the office and my apartment. Derek’s got me rolled in bubble wrap and stashed in a closet—”

“I *should* have you on a plane out of the state!”

Kat raised her voice and talked over her cousin. “I’d sort of like to know what the hell is going on now.”

He froze. “Ask Derek if he smelled anything odd.”

Kat made an outraged noise a second before Derek’s voice came on the phone. “I heard the question. And no, nothing odd. Normal human smells, mostly soap and aftershave. Could be they loaded up on it on purpose to screw

up any trail that they'd leave, though. Kat's computer at the office was trashed."

It didn't sound like something Charles Talbot would have done. "We're at Alec's house. Keep Kat away from her apartment, and I'll have Nick check out the office. Thanks, Derek."

"Wait just a God damn minute, Holt. You can't send Nick running into the middle of that shit by herself."

Jackson remembered Alec's words and groaned. Derek was already in a protective rage, and the last thing they needed was to rile him even more by endangering Nick. "Fine, we'll have someone else do it. Just stick close to Kat."

"Oh, she's not going anywhere. So figure this out before she kills me."

"Yeah, will do." He hung up and cursed as he made his way up the steps and through the door. "Alec?"

Alec wasn't in the living room, but Mackenzie was there, digging through the duffle bag he'd retrieved from Mahalia's. She jerked her head toward the back of the house. "He said he was going to his study to make some calls."

Jackson flipped the deadbolt home. "I have to go talk to him. Someone broke into our office and Kat's apartment while we were gone."

The blood drained from Mackenzie's face, but Alec's heavy footsteps in the hallway forestalled her reply. He strode

into the living room with his phone against his ear and a frown. “What the fuck? The office *and* Kat’s place?”

“Yeah. Doesn’t sound like the kind of thing Talbot would do, unless he’s trying to create a diversion. I thought we’d ask Nick to check it out, but Gabriel got growly about that. Any ideas?”

“Shit.” Alec sighed and tilted his head back, and Jackson knew from experience he was weighing priorities in his head. Finally he blew out another breath and nodded. “Okay. I’m going to lock this place the hell down. You get a damn gun out of my garage and keep an eye on Mackenzie while I head to the office.”

“Check the files, okay? Derek said they destroyed Kat’s computer.”

“Yeah, I will.” Alec tossed the phone at Jackson. “Your freaky psychic called twice. He sounds even more paranoid than usual.”

They’d used Wesley Dade as a contact before. His precognition was among the most reliable Jackson had seen, but Wesley usually didn’t call him out of the blue. “I’ll see what’s up. It could be related to the break-ins.” *Or to Talbot.*

“Good.” Alec turned on his heel, striding toward the back of his house and the attached garage. “Lock up behind me, and ward yourself and Mackenzie to hell and back.”

When his partner had gone, Jackson turned to Mackenzie. “Looks like more excitement. You have enough to worry about. I’m sorry.”

Mackenzie’s fingers tightened around a shirt she’d pulled from the bag until her knuckles turned white. “Kat’s okay, right?”

“Hell yeah. She’s fine.” He pried her fingers from the shirt. “You met her cousin, remember? He’s not going to let anything happen to her.”

“Her cousin.” Mackenzie’s eyebrows came together, but she released the shirt finally. “Derek? The one Nick has a crush on? He’s Kat’s cousin?”

“Yeah. Shit, I thought I told you.” He pulled her over to sit on the couch and lowered his arm around her shoulders. “Derek will watch out for Kat.”

“You might have told me.” Mackenzie took a breath and let it out in a tired sigh as she leaned closer. “God, I’ve learned so much in a week, my head can’t hold it all. I’m surprised I know my own—” She stopped abruptly and laughed hysterically. “Oh God, I *didn’t* know my own name.”

He tucked her head against his shoulder. “First, it’ll catch up with you. Later, you’ll catch up with it. You’ll see.”

She was silent for so long he started to think she’d dozed off, but finally she turned her head until her breath tickled his neck. “Thank you.”

She shouldn't have been thanking him. "If I'd done my job in the first place, you wouldn't have gotten snatched."

"Don't," she whispered. "Because if I hadn't run away—if I'd stayed—Steven would still be alive. I don't know how to live with that."

Jackson cursed himself. He couldn't very well tell her not to blame herself if he was going to sit there and do it. "All right. How about this? No blame, on anyone. It's stupid and pointless, right?"

"Right. Stupid and pointless." Her words were beginning to slur together. "What time is it?"

"Just after five." He eased off the couch and picked her up. "Bed?"

"No, we need to plan."

He shushed her as he headed down the hallway to the guest room. "Sleep until Alec gets back. Then we'll plan."

"Okay." Her head dropped to his shoulder in a trusting manner that made his chest ache. "I didn't sleep much while I was gone."

"Me either, baby." Jackson laid her on the bed and stretched out behind her. "I could barely even close my eyes."

She laughed softly as she snuggled into his arms. "That didn't stop us from staying up half the night last night."

"More important things to do." They had more important things to do *now*, as well, but Jackson couldn't help but feel

they'd be all right with whatever came...as long as they faced it together. "Now go to sleep. Alec drives like a bat out of hell. He'll be back in no time."

Hunger finally woke Mackenzie. The spot next to her on the bed had been empty long enough for the sheets to cool, which meant Jackson had left her to sleep longer than she'd meant to. Her stomach rumbled its annoyance as she rolled over in the strange bed and squinted through the darkness of the room at the clock on the bedside table.

Midnight. She heard the murmur of voices as she rose and padded to the bathroom. Alec and Jackson, by the timbre of the sound, though she couldn't quite make out the individual words.

Washing her face and rebraiding her hair made her feel less groggy. She watched her reflection in the mirror as she tied off the end of the braid, and studied her neck and the prominent love bite Jackson had left the night before. She'd long ago passed the age where hickeys were amusing, but something inside her took intense pleasure in the visible proof. That same thing had purred in pleasure when she'd seen the mark of her own teeth on his throat, a blatant reminder that he was hers.

She tossed the braid over her shoulder and traced her fingers over the mark. Warmth rose in her at the memory, along with a desire she had to put out of her mind for now. Her life was in imminent, serious danger, and while the adrenaline might make the idea of sex appealing...

Living long enough to have lots and lots of it is way better.

It wasn't until she reached to open the hallway door that Mackenzie realized there weren't two voices coming from the other room. There were three, and one of them was a woman.

One of them was Mahalia.

Guilt paralyzed her. She froze with her fingers wrapped around the knob and her heart pounding, literally unable to twist her hand. Opening the door would mean walking out and facing Mahalia with the knowledge that Steven had died because of her.

She had no idea how long she stood there before a gentle knock on the door made her leap back, a startled cry catching in her throat.

The door cracked open and Alec stuck his head in, his expression sympathetic. "Hey. I heard you up and about. Thought I'd check on you."

"I—" She tried to pull herself together. "I was just—"

"Yeah." Alec came in, shut the door and leaned against it, his arms crossed over his chest. Though his stance looked

intimidating, his eyes and voice were almost gentle. “Listen, kiddo. She’s hurting now, and nothing’s going to change that. I can’t promise she’s going to greet you with hugs and kisses. But not a damn one of us thinks you should have sat there like a damsel waiting for someone to rescue you. If you hadn’t grabbed at every chance to get the fuck out, you wouldn’t be the right kind of woman for Jackson.”

It was more than she’d heard from him for the entire length of their acquaintance. Her surprise must have shown on her face, because he chuckled. “You’re amazed I know that many words, huh? Well, here’s my secret, sweetheart. When you don’t talk much, people actually listen when you open your mouth, even if it’s only because they’re shocked.” He winked, pulled open the door and gestured to her.

I can do this. She squared her shoulders and nodded once before stepping through the door. “Thanks, Alec.”

He answered her with a smile before following her into the hallway, effectively cutting off her path of retreat. “You can do it,” he murmured, his voice echoing her thought.

Walking into the kitchen to face Mahalia was the hardest thing she’d ever done.

Mahalia sat on a stool at the island, her elbows on the counter. Jackson stood on the other side, a dish towel thrown over one shoulder, chopping vegetables. He gestured to the

spot next to his mentor. “Kenzie. Have a seat. We were just talking.”

Mackenzie hesitated, but Alec’s presence at her back made it impossible to do anything but move forward into the kitchen. “Hello, Mahalia.”

The older woman kept her head down and her eyes on the coffee mug in her hands. “Mackenzie.”

Jackson opened a cabinet next to the range hood. “Are you hiding any more spices in here, Alec? Something besides salt and pepper?” His tone was determinedly casual.

“There’s steak rub in there.” Alec’s voice came from directly behind her, and Mackenzie felt his hand on her shoulder. He nudged her toward the stool and walked past her. “I don’t cook much, Jackson.”

“I was hoping against hope.” He glanced at Mackenzie as she slid onto the stool. “Tell me you like cream sauces.”

“Anything’s fine. I’m pretty hungry.” The tension in the kitchen made her fidget uncomfortably, but she had no idea how to break it.

Mahalia stared at the row of cabinets. She said nothing, but her hand inched slowly across the counter. She wrapped her fingers around Mackenzie’s and squeezed.

A lump formed in Mackenzie’s throat as she turned her hand over and clutched at Mahalia’s. She knew she shouldn’t

speaking, but the words tumbled out in a hoarse whisper. “I’m so sorry.”

Mahalia’s teeth sank into her full lower lip, and she shook her head.

Jackson pulled a carton of cream from the refrigerator. “Mahalia said she and Michelle thought of something. A way to beat Talbot.”

Her heart beat faster. “How?”

Mahalia cleared her throat. “There isn’t much any of us can do against Charles Talbot’s magic. But he’s just like any other Seer.”

Jackson put a steaming mug of coffee in front of Mackenzie. “If we get him in his cat form, he won’t be able to use his magic.”

She clutched the coffee mug and tried not to let her hands shake. “Can you do that?”

Mahalia turned to her, finally meeting her eyes. “There’s a spell, an old one, but it involves a lot of unsavory things, plus that time you don’t really have. On the other hand, another cougar Seer could do it without a spell.”

“I don’t understand.” She looked from Mahalia to Jackson and back. “I thought Seers were rare.”

He tossed the vegetables into a steaming pot. “That’s the part we’d gotten to, incidentally. Me reminding May that

Charles Talbot happens to be the only cougar Seer we know of.”

Mahalia tapped her fingernails on the counter. “Don’t any of you people smoke?”

“May.”

She sighed. “No more Seers. But there’s one thing we could do.”

Mackenzie held her breath.

Jackson grunted in frustration, and Mahalia pointed a finger at him. “We have to turn you into a Seer.”

Alec spit out his beer with a choked noise. “You’re going to do *what*?”

Jackson braced his hands on the counter and hung his head. “She’s lost her ever-loving mind, Alec. Around the fucking bend.”

“You both need to shut up. I’m *not* in the mood.” Mahalia shoved her mug at Jackson. “Warm that up. Michelle and I figured it all out. There’s something we can do, a relatively simple binding spell. For you and Mackenzie. The two of you together...”

He started shaking his head before she finished speaking. “No.”

Mackenzie ignored him and focused her attention on Mahalia. “The two of us together can what?”

Jackson snorted as he refilled Mahalia's mug. "I'm a spell caster, and you're a cougar. Put us together, and you've got a Seer. Only it's not that simple, is it, May?"

"You and Jackson would share energy, but he would essentially become the human part of the equation," Mahalia explained. "You'd have to remain in your cat form, or the effects of the spell would be broken."

Mackenzie glanced at Jackson again. "So what? If it gives us the power to stop him, I'll stay a cat as long as I have to." If they were going to trap Charles as a cougar... An uncomfortably predatory part of her thrilled at the idea of being able to fight him. Maybe even kill him.

"When she said we'd share energy, she means it," Jackson murmured. "If something happened to me—if I couldn't break the spell—you'd be stuck, Kenzie. *If* you survived it."

"And if something happened to me? What would that mean for you?"

"Pretty much the same thing."

Mackenzie stared at her untouched coffee and ran her thumb over the handle of the mug. "I was asleep for seven hours. I'm assuming no one came up with a better plan during that time?"

"May just got in an hour ago." Jackson sighed. "But no. We haven't been able to come up with anything better."

“We wracked our brains, Jack.” Mahalia pushed the stool back and stood. “It’s the only thing Michelle and I figured had a snowball’s chance of working.”

“Then we should do it.” Mackenzie met Jackson’s gaze and held it, and the rest of the room faded away. She could see the worry and fear in his eyes, not just of what they faced, but of what could happen to her. He didn’t want to put her in danger.

But she didn’t want to put anyone else in danger. Being around her was dangerous enough. Mahalia had lost Steven. Jackson’s office and friends had been threatened. Charles wouldn’t stop until he had her, and Mackenzie wasn’t going to sit around and let everyone else take all the risks.

She let her determination show on her face. “We should do it, Jackson.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her, and Mahalia cleared her throat. “Alec? We should...”

“No.” Jackson tossed the kitchen towel on the counter. “Finish dinner, please. Mackenzie and I are going to talk. Privately.”

Mackenzie slid off the stool and ignored Alec’s slight frown. “Fine. Where do you want to talk?”

“It’s a nice night. Let’s go out back.”

Jackson struggled to contain his arguments until they made it out of the house. Mackenzie followed him, and they walked in silence until they reached the stone table near the middle of Alec's courtyard.

Before he could speak, she turned sharply and stared at him in the dim light from the moon. "I'm not going to sit around and let more people die for me."

"I wouldn't ask you to." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "But you also need to know that no one here is into the idea of you sacrificing yourself to get rid of Talbot."

"I'm not really into the idea either. But any chance we have to beat his magic..." She trailed off and closed her eyes. "God, Jackson. That spell? The one that kept me from changing? The one that almost killed you and Mahalia just to fix? He took it down like it was nothing."

He sat on a bench. "Yeah. I'm not saying this isn't our best chance." He drew in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "But we shouldn't delude ourselves, Kenzie. It's dangerous. For both of us, but especially for you. You won't be able to break it. You'll have to trust me to do it."

She braced her hands on her hips. "Why, exactly, would you want me to stay a gigantic cat forever? Why would you want me to be a gigantic *angry* cat? Of all the things I'm worried about, Jackson, trusting you isn't one of them."

“Maybe it should be,” he admonished. “You weren’t around for any of our conversations about it, but statistically speaking? Seers are fucking nuts. Nick’s sister is an anomaly. Charles Talbot’s the norm.” The words were blunt, maybe even hurtful, but he couldn’t risk having her not understand. “What if I get all that power, and it sends me off the rails?”

“It won’t,” she insisted, without a hint of doubt in her voice. “I trust *you*. The man who risked his life for me without even knowing me. The man who walked into Charles Talbot’s house to rescue me. I trust you, Jackson Holt. Completely. Absolutely.”

“Well, that makes one of us, because I’m not sure I’m that strong.” In any other situation, he wouldn’t have doubted his resolve for a second, but this... “A lot of the wolf Seers have had to be put down, Mackenzie, like dogs, and they’d lived their entire lives with that power.”

She crossed the grass between them in three long steps and slid into his lap, her knees on either side of his hips. Her hands skated over his arms and shoulders to cup his face. “I trust you,” she whispered again. “You’ll stay strong because of me. For me. You’ll do what you have to do and break the spell, and we can spend the rest of our lives practicing having sex without me breaking the furniture.”

“I’m not joking, Mackenzie.” He caught her wrists and glared at her. “It’s not funny.”

“Do you know what he said he was going to do to me?” Her voice lowered to a harsh whisper. “He was going to get a psychic. One strong enough to control me. Marcus was supposed to think I’d changed my mind, and I’d be trapped in my head dying a little every day while Charles’s psychic paraded me around like a puppet. That’s what that man is willing to do to me if he gets his hands on me. I will do anything to keep it from happening, no matter how much danger it puts me in.”

He closed his eyes against the wave of rage he expected, but he only felt tired. “We have to do it. So you can be safe.” He rubbed her wrists and released them. “It’s the only way.”

She kissed his forehead. “Don’t doubt yourself so easily, Jackson. Every instinct I have tells me that you’ll keep me safe. And I won’t exactly be helpless as a huge cat.”

If only you could stop me if I needed it. “I’ll talk to Alec. He’ll help.”

“We’ll end this. We can do it, Jackson. Together.”

He nudged her, and she slid from his lap to her feet and held out her hands. He rose, his heart feeling lighter. “Yeah. Let’s go eat so we can learn how to do this thing.”

Jackson was so tired he might not have heard his cell phone ringing, but Mackenzie jabbed him in the side with her elbow. “Make that stop.”

He grabbed for the phone and nearly knocked it off the nightstand. The backlit display showed a familiar name and number. “Shit. It’s Wesley Dade. I forgot to call him back.”

Mackenzie mumbled something and snuggled closer to his side as he flipped open the phone.

Wesley’s voice crackled out of the speaker before he got a chance to answer. “Jesus fuck, Holt. It takes an act of God to get you on the phone.”

“Alec got your message, but I’ve been covered over.” He sat up, careful to keep his voice low. “What’s going on?”

“Covered over and then some. What the hell did you stir up? My head’s gonna split open from all the visions of terror and chaos I’m getting nailed with thanks to you.”

The hair on the back of his neck rose, and his lips felt numb as he murmured, “Care to explain, Dade?”

“Started two days ago. Who the fuck did you piss off, Jackson? I’m talking serious damage. Everyone you ever knew is going to die if you don’t stop doing whatever you’re doing. I mean *everyone*. That hot-ass chick who bought Mahalia’s, your cute little assistant, her cousin, your partner, your God damn *parents*—”

“What the fuck?” His heart shuddered to a halt before resuming its furious pounding. Nick, Alec, Kat, his family... “Fucking hell. Christ. Okay. What’s happening? What have you seen?”

He felt the bed shift behind him even as Wesley continued, “I don’t know, man. Magic. Unholy wrath of God, smite the wicked *magic*. Maybe not rain of fire or locusts in the streets, just this knowledge. Something’s coming for them. It’s big and bad and scary, and it wants you to hurt.”

“Yeah, it does.” He slid out from under the covers and grabbed his pants. “How soon?”

“Couple days at the most. Maybe not even that. Listen, man, you should get the fuck out of town.”

Mackenzie handed him his shirt and slid past him to kneel in front of her own bag. Jackson tried to slow his breathing and focus. “I’m already gone. If you don’t hear from me in a week, talk to Alec. Tell him I owed you, big time. He’ll take care of it.”

“Okay, Holt. Just be careful. You pay me too much to end up dead.”

“Will do, Dade.” He closed the phone with cold fingers and tossed it on the bed while he tugged on his jeans. “How much of that did you catch?”

She'd already pulled on a pair of slacks and was adjusting the strap of her bra. "All of it, I think. Can we get out of here without Alec hearing us?"

"Not likely." He stepped closer and pulled her body to his. "But, since we're going to steal his car, I'd better make it work." Jackson closed his eyes and mumbled the Latin words that comprised one of the first incantations Mahalia had taught him. A wave of magic swept over them both, and he lifted his lids. "Don't scream or slam any doors, and we'll get out." *We have to. For all their sakes.*

Mackenzie rocked up on her toes and kissed him once, hard. Then she snatched a plain black T-shirt and jerked it over her head. With her shoes in one hand and her duffle bag in the other, she nodded to him. "Let's go."

They crept down the hall, and Jackson took Alec's keys from the hall table. He handed them to Mackenzie. "Go. I need to leave a note, at least. Tell him we're okay."

She nodded, and he grabbed the notepad by the extension phone. It took him only seconds to scribble a few words.

Dade said Talbot was going to kill us all, so gather everyone and be on the lookout. Hopefully, we've fixed it by leaving. Sorry about the car, but this is important.

He left the note on the pad and closed the door gently.

Inside Alec's SUV, he laid his hand on the dash and repeated the charm before starting the engine. "We can get as

far away as we can in a couple of hours and do the binding spell.”

Mackenzie pulled something out of her bag. It was a small charm, one that looked like the talismans Michelle and Mahalia had created to get by Charles’s wards. “I brought this too. I remembered how everyone kept talking about how you could track someone. This is the charm Charles made. I thought you could use it to find him.”

He tried to smile. “Good thinking. I can use it.”

“We can do this, Jackson.” She dropped the charm into the console between them and reached out to touch his leg. “We’re going to do it.”

“Yeah.” He headed for I-10 and covered her hand with his. “Yeah, we are.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Mackenzie dumped the takeout containers on their motel room's tiny, scratched table and stretched her arms over her head. "Okay. Let's eat and you can explain to me how this works."

Jackson double-checked his notepad and the small bags of herbs in front of him. "Not much to explain. Like May said, it's a fairly simple spell. The tricky part is finding someone willing to go along with it."

"Uh-huh." Even though they'd been sitting for the last few hours, she sank into a chair and reached for the box of chicken fingers. "So you're going to do something that sort of makes us one person. But it won't kick in until I shift forms?"

"Right. When you shift, the spell will take effect. You won't be able to shift back until I release you."

She nibbled distractedly on the chicken, but most of her earlier appetite had fled. "But I'll be me, right? I mean, I won't be a wild animal."

“You’d have to stay in cougar form without shifting back for a long, long time before you started to lose touch with your human side like that.”

“Okay. So, you hold the spell.” She tossed the chicken finger down and said the one thing they’d been avoiding. “And I kill him.”

“Hell, no.” Jackson leaned back in his chair. “I do the spell and then shoot his ass. Or give him a convenient heart attack, or any number of cool things I’ll probably be able to do as a temporary Seer. You’re my backup, sweetie, not the brute force.”

Her temper flared and she curled her fingers around the arms of her chair in an attempt to keep from tangling them in his shirt. “Well that just seems downright stupid, Jackson, since I’ve got a lot more brute force than you do right about now.”

“You absolutely do, and we might need it. But unless we do, I want you as far away from this shit as possible. I don’t know how practiced Talbot is with fighting as a cat. One lucky swipe at you, and he could take us both down.”

It was logical, even reasonable. But every instinct in her body protested that she needed to *fight*. She needed to protect Jackson, because he was hers. She closed her eyes. Her fingers hurt as she slowly uncurled them from the arms of the chair.

“Okay, I’ll be backup. But you’re not stashing me somewhere. We’re doing this together.”

When she opened her eyes he gave her a lopsided grin. “Wouldn’t do me much good not to bring my backup to the fight, darlin’.”

She didn’t want to laugh, but she couldn’t help it. “Fine. You cast the spell, you shoot him, and we go home before Alec and Mahalia track us down and kill us.”

He rubbed a hand over his forehead and stared at the notebook on the table. “At this point, I’m looking forward to the angry yelling. It’ll mean we won.”

“Yeah, I’ll remind you of that when Nick finds out about what we did.” *Just please be alive to yell at us.* She sipped her own soda. It was room temperature and flat, but it helped her suddenly dry mouth. “We should do it. Now. So we can figure out a backup plan in case it doesn’t work.”

“It’ll work.” His retort seemed almost automatic. “But we may as well do it. Once we have the spell in place, I can use that talisman to locate Talbot. Then we’ll go find the bastard.”

Mackenzie closed the box of food, shoved it aside and pushed the table aside for good measure. She rose from her chair and crossed the space between them in one step. “Kiss me first.” *In case something happens.* “Kiss me, Jackson. Promise me we’re going to go home after this and do normal things like go on actual dates.”

Jackson pulled her onto his lap. “Dates. Bowling and bad movies and maybe, if Nicky and Gabriel get their shit figured out, a couple of double-dates. I promise.” He stroked her hair back from her forehead and brushed his lips over hers. “I promise.”

“Good.” She whispered the word against his lips, tilted her head to kiss him, long and deep and desperate. Jackson met her need with his own, twining his tongue with hers, one hand splayed across her back and the other wrapped in her hair.

Finally, he broke the kiss and rested his forehead against hers. “Still want to do this?”

No. “Yes. I trust you.”

He patted her leg. “All right. Open the window, okay?”

Mackenzie slipped from his lap with one last kiss. The motel they’d found wasn’t a high-class establishment, had in fact been chosen based on its willingness to accept cash and no names. At some point someone had painted over the window, and she braced herself and shoved as hard as she could.

The window flew up with a dangerous rattle, and a crack webbed across the corner of the glass. “Shit. I keep forgetting.”

“We’ll leave them some extra money when we go.” Jackson opened two of the plastic bags and shook some of the

dried herbs onto a sheet of aluminum foil. It looked like something out of a Hollywood movie about drugs, especially when he pulled a lighter from his pocket and set the green mounds ablaze. “Come here.”

The smell threatened to overwhelm her from ten feet away. She wrinkled her nose and tried to breathe through her mouth. “Okay, that’s not going to make me high, is it?”

“It’s hyssop and meadowsweet,” he murmured, “moistened with a little lavender infusion to make it smudge. You won’t get high, but your eyes will burn. It can’t be helped.”

She watched smoke waft from the pile of herbs on aluminum foil. “So what do I have to do?”

“Just...concentrate on me.” He held up his hands, his palms toward her. “Put your hands on mine and focus on me.”

In spite of her conviction and trust, her hands trembled. They looked tiny compared to Jackson’s, delicate and pale and incapable of containing the kind of strength they held now. She pressed her palms to his and drew in a breath when she felt his energy tickle against her. “I—I can feel the magic—”

“Shh.” He closed his eyes with a deep inhalation and whispered, “*Geminare*.” A faint golden light flared between their palms and settled into a steady glow. Jackson looked at her. “Breathe.”

She inhaled instinctively, and the light between them disappeared. “Is that—”

“It? Yeah.” He dropped his hands and glanced over at the table and the smoldering herbs. “For now. But that was just the groundwork. The real fireworks should happen when we activate the connection.”

“Which I do by shifting.” She glanced at her T-shirt and slacks. “I’m going to put on something easier to get out of, in case I have to do it in a hurry. I can’t forget Steven’s cautionary tale of the cougar trapped in underwear.”

Jackson’s faint smile vanished. “Yeah, probably not the best plan of action.”

She watched as he picked up a bottled water and extinguished the herbs. His shoulders were set in a stiff line, and he heaved a sigh before turning to face her. “Did Mahalia make you feel bad? I should have asked before.”

“No, she tried real hard not to, but God, Jackson. Under the circumstances, I wouldn’t blame her if she hated me.”

“She doesn’t.” He sank into the chair again and rubbed his hands over his face. “I think she always thought there’d be time for them. Now she doesn’t have that. It’s not you.”

There was a lesson to be learned from that, too. Mackenzie pulled a pair of loose cotton shorts and a tank top from the duffle, both of which she could wiggle out of in seconds. She shucked the T-shirt and reached back to unhook

her bra. “I just hate knowing I’ll always be a reminder,” she whispered as she pulled on the tank top. “That she’ll be unhappy when she sees me.”

“She won’t.” He nodded toward the dresser. “The amulet?”

“Yeah, I dropped it next to the TV.” She kicked off her pants and underwear, tugged on the shorts, and tried not to imagine what she’d look like if she changed before she managed to get out of her clothing. *A cougar in cute pajamas. Charles can laugh himself to death.*

Jackson raised an eyebrow as he snagged the talisman from the scarred surface of the TV stand. “Good thing it’s warm out.” He sat on the edge of the bed and took a deep breath. “This’ll only take a minute.”

“Mmm.” She folded her clothes haphazardly and shoved them into her bag. “Don’t get distracted by how naked I am under my teeny-tiny shorts.”

“I’ll try,” he murmured absently, already intent on his task. After several seconds, his fingers clenched around the wooden disk. A shudder wracked him, and he almost slid off the end of the bed.

“Jackson?” Mackenzie closed her fingers around his shoulder. His entire body had gone stiff, and his muscles trembled under her hand. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

His eyes shot open. “No.” He grunted and grabbed his head as magic slashed tangibly through the room, stealing her breath. “He’s—”

The door flew open, flew *outward* as if someone had torn it from its frame. Mackenzie stared in shock as it landed in the parking lot with a deafening crash.

Dust billowed up from the dirty sidewalk, and Charles waved a hand as he stepped through the open doorway. A small smile, devoid of any real feeling, curled his lips as he looked at Jackson. “The backlash from a location spell can be painful if your target happens to be standing outside.”

Jackson’s eyes locked on hers as he reached for his ankle. “*Now*, Kenzie.”

There wasn’t time to take off the clothes. Mackenzie closed her eyes, reached for the power inside her—
—and found herself blocked.

Her eyes flew open when Charles laughed again. “Not right now, dear.” He flicked his fingers in an absent gesture, and a solid wave of power slammed into her so hard it knocked the wind out of her. She barely realized her feet had left the ground, not until the solid bulk of the wall crashed against her back. Pain arced through her as her head cracked into the aged wallpaper, and the last thing she saw before blackness overtook her was Charles’s tiny, chilling smile.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Fuck.

Jackson watched Mackenzie slump to the floor. His head pounded from the backlash, but he edged off the bed and toward her. If he could reach her, rouse her somehow...

“Did she lose consciousness? That’s a pity.” Charles walked into the ratty motel room, and a wave of malevolent power washed over Jackson. “I suppose she’s not as sturdy as I thought.”

Jackson lunged for Mackenzie’s prone body. Charles clucked his tongue and Jackson froze, his muscles shaking and rigid. Rage washed through him, and his trembling worsened. “Let me go, you son of a bitch.”

“Temper, temper, Mr. Holt. I don’t want to hurt you. Not yet.” The invisible force of Charles’s magic knocked Jackson back onto the bed. “I’m afraid it’s probably inevitable, though. Your death is the only lesson harsh enough to teach Mackenzie her place. Unfortunately she needs to be awake to learn it.”

Jackson reached inside, but his ready supply of magic had been drained by the joining spell and the fouled-up locator spell. *Not that it would do a damn bit of good, Holt.* He inched his hand toward his ankle holster. “Her place in what, Talbot? Carrying on your life’s work? Marcus is long gone.”

“Do you think he’ll be any harder to find than you were?”

Jackson shook his head. “I wasn’t talking about geography. He won’t go along with it. Not anymore.”

A crack appeared in Charles’s calm façade, revealing a hint of madness. His hands shook as he curled them into fists, and the power in the room swelled. “He won’t have a choice. If he refuses...” He smiled suddenly. “Mackenzie is indispensable. Marcus is not.”

Realization stunned Jackson. “Another kid made it.” Anger gripped him, along with a fresh wave of what he’d known in his gut even before he’d watched Steven die. *He won’t stop. He won’t ever stop.*

“We got two boys before our sweet little Jessica came along.” Charles looked at Mackenzie again and all the man’s barriers fell away, showing a terrifying pride and possessiveness. “She’s my greatest accomplishment. And you can’t have her.”

Jackson bit the inside of his cheek to hold back his retort. As long as the old man’s attention remained on Mackenzie, he

had a chance. His fingers again crept toward his holster. *Don't blow it, Holt—*

Mackenzie groaned softly, a pained noise that made his chest tighten. Charles took a step forward, his gaze locked on her. "I'm sorry it has to be this way," he murmured. "You forced me, Jessica. Forced me to do this to you."

With Charles's back to him, Jackson took the opportunity to snatch his gun from its holster with numb, nerveless fingers. He thought he might drop it, but his arm didn't waver as he aimed at the broad expanse between Charles's shoulders and fired.

Light and magic flared even as the muzzle flash faded, and searing pain tore through Jackson's leg. "Fuck!"

Charles glanced over his shoulder at the bullet wound in Jackson's thigh, and sighed as if Jackson had done something terribly inconvenient. "Why do you persist in these ineffectual shows of defiance? Your wolves couldn't stop me. Your Seer couldn't stop me. What advantage do you think you have they didn't?"

Through the haze of pain, Jackson saw Mackenzie's eyes flutter open. She met his gaze and dug her teeth into her lower lip as her face screwed up in concentration. She shimmered, and for a brief second he caught a glimpse of a cat tangled in the skimpy clothes she'd pulled on.

The power hit him.

The wave of sheer strength that washed over him was staggering. It dwarfed everything magical he'd ever felt, from the smallest glamour to the most involved, multilayered spell, and he laughed. The blood welling between his fingers seemed inconsequential, meaningless.

A bullet can't kill me.

Another laugh bubbled out of him, and he looked at Charles. "I think the odds just evened out."

Charles blinked at him, confused incomprehension fading into shocked realization and, for just a moment, a hint of fear.

Even with Michelle's halting description of what it felt like to force a change on someone, it should have been harder. Jackson shouldn't have been able to so easily command the magic racing through him, to turn and focus it on Charles Talbot. To use it against him.

But it was terrifyingly simple.

The Seer glinted, blurred as the magic curled around him. For several tense seconds Charles battled it, but the power of the spell plowed through the Seer's attempts at resistance with an ease that left Jackson breathless. Charles's human form slid away, leaving an aged, angry cougar in its place. He fought the confines of his clothing, and Jackson slumped back against the wall as nausea swept over him. A wall of misery stronger than any magic hangover he'd ever had crashed in on him,

obnoxious and suffocating, and he struggled to stay conscious as a snarl of challenge echoed through the room.

Mackenzie sent her most heartfelt thanks to Steven for his parable of the underwear-entangled cougar as she tore free of her tank top and lunged across the room. Charles struggled, his front legs tangled in his ripped shirt. She barreled into his side and knocked him over, but a quick twist of his body sent her tumbling past him before she could pin him down.

She scrambled to regain her footing and found him biting at the tattered shirt. He was wiggling out of the clothing more quickly than she'd thought possible, destroying her initial advantage.

So she braced her back paws against the ground and launched at him again, a fierce snarl erupting from her throat. He managed to free his front legs and rose to meet her, his teeth scraping across her shoulder and back. They rolled again, one over the other, and he landed on top of her. He swiped at her face with one paw, unsheathed claws digging through her fur.

She kicked out with her back legs and writhed away from him, clawing at his neck with another snarl. When she came to her feet this time, she put herself squarely between her opponent and Jackson.

She heard Jackson whisper something, but the words made no sense. She didn't have time to dwell on them anyway, because Charles hunched down and jumped at her. She met him with one shoulder, but his weight knocked her back. He clawed at her belly, and his jaws snapped on one of her hind legs.

Charles was larger, maybe even stronger, but he was slower too. She raked her claws down his side, and he screeched his pain and twisted to protect his vulnerable stomach. She didn't give him a chance to recover this time, just leapt on top of him and sank her teeth into the back of his shoulder.

He hissed, but her weight bore him to the floor. She growled and bit him again. He screamed and bucked, but she held tight, her claws digging into his sides. Mackenzie bit him again and again. Finally, she felt the grate and crunch of bone between her teeth.

Charles thrashed. He convulsed, his claws digging into the cheap carpet, and stilled.

Mackenzie rolled away and lay panting on her side as the adrenaline faded and pain took its place. She tried to regain her human form, only to remember too late that she couldn't, not while the spell was in place that gave Jackson power.

Jackson. The thought brought her to her feet, a hiss of pain leaving her when she put weight on her left leg. She

limped across the room and found Jackson leaning against the peeling wallpaper.

He'd gone pale, and sweat poured down his face and neck in rivulets. His jeans were soaked with blood, and the metallic tang of it stung her nose. She nudged his face with hers, but he didn't move.

Fear made her whimper as she did it again, harder. He mumbled something, and she lowered her mouth to his hand and nipped him gently.

His bloodied, weak fingers stroked her fur. "Did you get him?" he rasped.

She nipped at his fingers again and lifted her head to nuzzle his cheek with a low purr.

Jackson snorted and moved his hand to the top of her head. "*Finire.*"

It felt uncomfortably like the time she'd shocked herself trying to change a light bulb. Electricity raced through her, leaving a trembling exhaustion in its wake. Her back leg gave out and she sank to the floor next to Jackson as the last of the feeling faded.

Change. You have to change and get a doctor— She closed her eyes and reached for the power inside her. It was there again, a warm, gentle glow that unfurled as she willed herself back into her human form.

“Jackson.” Her voice sounded hoarse to her own ears as she pushed herself upright again. She was covered in bloody scratches, along with a few more painful puncture wounds, but the pain was tolerable. Jackson, on the other hand—

She registered the faint sound of sirens as she caught Jackson’s face between her hands. “Someone must have heard the gun and called the police. Is Talbot going to change back to a human?”

“No. He isn’t.” He looked down and grinned. “This is the weirdest damn thing I’ve ever seen in my life.” He turned and opened his clenched fist. A lump of metal lay in his blood-slicked palm.

“Is that—” She lifted the spent bullet from his hand that should have still been in his leg. “Jesus. How are we supposed to explain any of this to the cops? A wild cougar attacked me in the shower and you shot yourself?”

“We don’t explain it.” He climbed to his feet with a pained curse. “We have to get out of here. Can you drive?”

“Only if it’s to a hospital.” Pulling on clothing over the bleeding scratches wasn’t appealing, but driving down the road naked was bound to draw attention. “Can you keep yourself from bleeding to death in the car?” she demanded as she dragged on a pair of pants and her T-shirt.

“I’ve stopped it for now.” He moved slowly, laboriously, but he wasn’t dripping blood on the carpet. “Grab my gun, and

get Talbot's wallet. Hopefully they won't print the room for a dead cat." He snatched the bags of herbs and stuffed them into his bag.

She gathered Charles's clothing and wallet, and shoved the bundle into her duffel. She held Jackson's gun gingerly in one hand as she swung the bag over her shoulder and took his for good measure. "Here, make sure this doesn't go off. Give me the keys."

He handed them over and secured the gun in its holster. It took them only another minute to get into the car, and Jackson leaned back in his seat as she pulled out of the parking lot.

As soon as the sirens had faded away behind them, Mackenzie held out a hand to Jackson. "Cell phone. I need to find a hospital—"

"Get back on the interstate," he muttered. "Toward home. There's a hospital right off I-10." He handed over his cell phone. "Call Alec. He's the first listing..." The phone dropped to the seat beside her, and Jackson slumped against his seatbelt.

"Shit. *Shit.*" She ignored the phone and fumbled at Jackson's neck with one hand before she remembered she didn't need to feel for a pulse. She could hear his heartbeat, weak but steady. So she turned onto the interstate and prayed like hell as she dialed Alec's number.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“They always smell like death. Really *clean* death.”

“That’s the dumbest thing you’ve said today, Peyton, and that’s saying something.”

“Shut *up*. You know what I mean. Death and disinfectant.”

“Yeah, well, the place is making my skin crawl, and the smell is the least of it.”

If Jackson didn’t open his eyes, or at least his mouth, he’d have to listen to them for hours. “For the love of God. You both hate hospitals. We get it.”

By the time he lifted his scratchy eyelids, Nick was by his side, her hand closed around his. “Jackson Holt, you scared the living Christ out of me. Out of all of us.”

Hair tickled at his other hand, and he turned his head just enough to see Mackenzie slumped over the bed, her cheek on the mattress and her fingers curled just short of his.

Alec stood at the end of the bed, a tired but relieved smile on his face. He nodded to Mackenzie’s sleeping form. “I

moved her into a more comfortable position once, but she woke up, said something rude and went right back to that.”

Something inside him soothed, a tension he hadn’t realized he carried. “Is she okay, or does she need to be in a bed too?”

Nick smiled gently. “She’s fine. Scrapes and a bite in her thigh. The scrapes are almost healed.”

“Good.” He glanced at Alec. “I bled in your car, didn’t I?”

“A whole hell of a lot. We’ll add that to the list of things I’m going to kick your ass for when you’re better.”

“Just remember I saved your life,” Jackson reminded him. “All of you.” That alone was worth every second of terror and pain.

Nick thumped him. “Hey, medical miracle. They’ve got more tests to run on you, since they can’t seem to find the bullet that *should* be lodged in your leg. But we’re going to get you out of here as soon as possible, okay?”

“Jackson?” Mackenzie lifted her head and blinked at him from behind the tangled fall of her hair. She looked exhausted and bleary, with several fading scratches on her cheek and puffy red eyes. When she saw he was awake, though, her smile lit her face.

He raised his hand to her cheek. “Kenzie. The hero of the hour.”

“I think we can share the honor.” She kissed his palm softly. “You scared me half to death when you passed out in the car.”

“Sorry.” He pulled his other hand free of Nick’s and brushed Mackenzie’s hair back. “I love you. I forgot to say that before we almost got ourselves killed.”

Her hand curled around his, and he swore he saw tears in her bright blue eyes as her trembling smile widened. “I like it better this way. I can say that I love you too, and it doesn’t feel like goodbye.”

The door slammed, and Jackson grinned, but he didn’t pull his gaze away from hers. “Nick and Alec just hauled ass out of here, didn’t they?”

“Do you really blame them?” She rose unsteadily and leaned over to kiss him. “If you were sturdier, I’d climb into bed with you.”

“If I had more blood left, I’d let you.” A tear rolled off her cheek and splashed on his pillow. “Shh. You’re free now. You don’t have to run. You could go back home.” The words left a bitter taste on his tongue, but he forced them out anyway. “You don’t have to stay.”

Mackenzie laughed and shook her head. “I’ll go back to South Dakota, but only when you’re healthy enough to go with me. Maybe you can use your investigative skills to help me if my scummy landlord has taken all my stuff because I

missed paying rent. Though the only things I really want are my wardrobe and my CD collection and a few pictures.”

Relief made him weak. “If we can’t get it back, we’ll replace it all.” He wrapped a lock of her hair around his fingers and winked. “You’ll have to meet Mama.”

“Oh Jesus.” She dropped her forehead to his, and her hair fell around them in a curtain that smelled faintly of the herbs he’d used to cast the spell. “This is crazy. I don’t even know your middle name.”

“Sure you do. It’s Jackson.”

Her head popped up and she gave him a wild-eyed look. “So I don’t know your *first* name? That’s not helping.”

“It’s Andrew,” he told her softly. “Andrew Jackson Holt.” He waited for it to sink in before flashing her a sheepish smile. “Mama’s a Southern belle, darlin’. A real Georgia peach.”

“I guess so.” Her smile returned. “I suppose I’ll have to meet her, since I’m not planning on letting her son out of my sight again for a couple months.”

“Good.” After the last few days, holing up in his apartment with takeout menus and rented DVDs sounded like heaven. “It isn’t going to be easy.”

“What isn’t?”

“Life with me.” He shifted uncomfortably and kissed her again. “I wish I could say the last week of my life has been a unique experience, but sometimes things get dangerous.”

She studied him in silence long enough to make him nervous. Then her teeth caught her lower lip, and she tilted her head. “Guess it’s a good thing your new girlfriend has super powers.”

Jackson laughed, but his amusement faded as he remembered Charles’s words. “We need to talk to Marcus. Talbot said something about there being another kid like you two. A boy.”

“I think I heard.” She settled on the edge of the bed, one hand still wrapped around his. “But we can worry about it later. When you’re better.”

He relaxed against the thin pillow and scratchy sheets. For the first time since he’d met Mackenzie, he could envision spending his days with her with no life-or-death interruptions or ticking clock. “Maybe Nick’ll give you the next couple of months off.”

Mackenzie lifted his hand and kissed his fingers. “Nick might have to find a new bartender. I’m feeling inspired to reach for my dreams, and my dreams don’t involve mixing drinks. Not professionally, anyway.”

His heart thumped. “She’ll get over it, especially when she sees how happy you are.”

“I will be,” she whispered, and the look in her eyes promised him a future full of passion and love and laughter. “I absolutely will be.”

Epilogue

Jackson shifted his weight and leaned heavily on his cane. “Did you bring it?”

Nick held a brown paper bag aloft. “Exactly what Mahalia told me to get. Forgot the glasses, though.”

He snorted. “I don’t think any of us have cooties, Nicky.”

Mahalia dropped a hand on Mackenzie’s shoulder and squeezed. “Even if we do, the tequila will make short work of ’em.”

Mackenzie covered Mahalia’s hand with her own. In the weeks since Charles’s death, Jackson’s mentor had gone out of her way to make her feel welcome, not just as a member of the odd group of supernaturals who’d made her bar a second home, but as an addition to Jackson’s life.

Even so, guilt filled Mackenzie as she stared at the small, cleanly chiseled headstone. The one thing Mahalia had refused to discuss was Steven’s death, and she didn’t know how the older woman would come to terms with the part Mackenzie had played in it. *It was my fault. My mistake.*

Nick crumpled the bag, shoved it at Alec and twisted the cap from the bottle in her hand. “Who wants to go first?”

Mahalia squinted against the afternoon sunlight. “That would be me.”

Instead of speaking, she held the bottle and stared at the grave in silence. Finally, she smiled faintly. “Damn near thirty years, wasn’t it? Rest well, Steven.” With that, she tilted back the bottle and gulped down several swallows. She coughed as she shoved it at Mackenzie. “I didn’t remember that stuff being so vile.”

Mackenzie cradled the bottle between her hands and tried to speak around the lump in her throat. “I wish I’d had more time—” Her eyes burned and she squeezed them shut. “Thank you.” She tried not to choke on the expensive liquor as it burned its way down her throat.

Jackson accepted the tequila with a lopsided grin. “You did it, Steven. You stopped it.” He drank and waved the bottle at Nick.

She sipped in silence and held it out to Alec, who shook his head. “Someone’s got to drive you lushes back home.”

Mackenzie slipped her arm around Jackson’s waist, silently urging him to lean on her. “Jackson needs to get back to the car soon. He shouldn’t be walking so much on his leg.”

“Don’t fuss,” he whispered against the top of her head.

Mahalia opened her bag and pulled out a worn, leather-bound book. “This was in Steven’s things.” She held it out to Mackenzie. “It’s Zacharias Nelson’s journal. It looks like he followed Charles’s plans pretty closely, but there’s nothing in there about the second boy. He mentioned your mother, though.”

Mackenzie’s hand shook as she reached out. “Did he think—” The words caught in her throat, drowned in a sudden wave of hope. A week ago she might have forced the hope back, but a week ago she hadn’t believed in magic and miracles. “Could she still be alive?”

“Old Zach thought so. Steven talked to me about it before...” She squinted and glanced away. “He never put much stock in it before you showed up, alive and well.”

Mackenzie clutched the book to her chest and tightened her arm around Jackson’s waist. “Then I guess I’ll just have to look.”

He hummed his agreement. “Good thing you’re dating a private investigator.”

She shushed him with a soft noise and met Mahalia’s gaze again. “I still don’t feel right about the will. Are you sure you won’t reconsider the arrangements?”

“Steven left me everything I wanted, honey,” she murmured with a shake of her head. “He wanted you to have the rest of his estate. So you could make a life for yourself.”

He'd left her a small fortune, enough to be self-sufficient while she found her feet. Enough to start her own dance school if she wanted, and to realize all the dreams that had been so out of reach only a few months ago.

She made sure Jackson was steady enough to stand on his own and reached out to take the bottle of tequila from Nick. The second gulp burned her throat just as much, but at least she could blame her tears on the alcohol as she stepped forward and upended the bottle. Amber liquid splashed onto the grave, and she cleared her throat as she righted the bottle. "Rest well," she whispered, echoing Mahalia's words.

About the Author

How do you make a Moira Rogers? Take a former forensic science and nursing student obsessed with paranormal romance and add a computer programmer with a passion for gritty urban fantasy. To learn more about this romance-writing, crime-fighting duo, visit their webpage at www.moirarogers.com, or drop them an email at moira@moirarogers.com. (Disclaimer: crime-fighting abilities may appear only in the aforementioned fevered imaginations.)

Look for these titles by Moira Rogers

Now Available:

Cry Sanctuary

Coming Soon:

Sanctuary Lost

He is tired of fighting. She has nowhere to run.

Cry Sanctuary

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Red Rock Pass Series, Book 1

Keith Winston is tired of fighting. The war between werewolves and wizards rages on in Europe, but he's come home to Red Rock, Montana in hopes of finding a bit of peace. Instead he finds more strife as he struggles against the pack's dictates that he resume his place as the alpha's right-hand man.

When he rescues a new wolf on the run, he knows his instant attraction to her could cause trouble. What he doesn't expect is to find himself embroiled in another battle that goes against all his instincts—and his heart.

Abigail Adler learned about the existence of werewolves only when she became one. With her life threatened by a corrupt alpha, she flees to the only sanctuary she knows: Red Rock. While she's grateful for the pack's protection, she chafes under its unbreakable rules of conduct—except when it comes to submitting to the passion Keith stirs in her.

Then her tormentor kidnaps her sister in an attempt to lure her out of hiding. To save her, Abby and Keith must be willing to do the very thing that could get them all killed—break all of the rules.

Warning: Hot werewolf sex, violence, explosions, and a heroine wielding a makeshift implement of destruction.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Cry Sanctuary:

“Oh, God.” Abby tried not to whimper, but the sound escaped her anyway. The animal inside surged forward again, ready—*desperate*—to be claimed, and she rose from the table, almost knocking her chair over. For a moment, she didn’t know what to do. Then she took a deep breath and walked from the tiny kitchenette to Keith’s bed.

She gathered every bit of courage she had and turned her back to him. “Can you unzip me? I can’t reach.”

Even though she heard him move, feeling his hands slide around her waist was a shock. Strong fingers stroked across her stomach before moving up to cup her breasts, and he drew her back against him. “When I get around to it.”

Fire streaked through her. Abby rocked back, whimpering again when she felt the hardness of his cock press against her ass. “Isn’t that the dangerous part?” she asked on a moan. “Getting me so excited?”

“Maybe for someone else.” His voice was cocky, almost arrogant. He pinched her nipples and rocked against her ass at the same time, his voice low and sensual. “But I can handle you no matter how excited you get, and it’s good practice for you.”

She cried out and covered his hands with hers, wishing the layers of cloth between his fingers and her breasts were gone. “Practice for what?” For going insane? For dying of frustration?

His breath heated the sensitive skin of her neck, and he bit her earlobe and tugged at her nipples. “For losing control without *losing* control. I can show you how.”

Abby shuddered and batted his hands away. She turned and wrapped her arms around his neck. The heels she wore afforded her easy reach of his mouth, and she bit his lip. “Sounds like a ton of work. We might need to practice a *lot*.” She skated her lips over his cheek and closed her teeth on his ear, growling softly.

His growl was louder, lower. He caught her lips in a bruising kiss as he grasped her hands and tugged them from around his neck. He guided her arms down, behind her back, and bit her lower lip in return as he caught her wrists in one hand. “We do need a lot of practice.”

One hand held her wrists trapped, but the other moved to the neckline of her dress. He tugged it down, revealing the thin fabric of the bra underneath, and made a low noise of approval. “And you need practice in letting me take my sweet time.” He caught her nipple between his thumb and finger and tweaked it again.

“Bossy bastard.” She tried to free her hands, but he held

them tight. Desire clashed with defiance, and Abby growled even as heat flooded her. “Fine. Just let me know when you’ve caught up.”

He jerked her forward, crushing her hips against his. “Oh, I was hard before we got through the door. But I’m not a kid who can’t control himself.” His fingers inched under the fabric of her bra and tugged it down, baring one breast.

Her head spun, and the ache inside her grew. She wanted to cry out again, to beg him to go faster, make her come. Instead, she clamped her lips together, muffling the moan that welled up in her throat. She squeezed her eyes shut and held her body stiffly against his. She wouldn’t let him win, wouldn’t let him see how close to the edge she was already.

His breath tickled her ear. “All through dinner, Abby. The whole time, I was imagining how it would feel to be inside you. To bend you over and show you how fucking good it can be when the person and the wolf want the same thing.”

When she opened her eyes, she could barely focus on his face. “Why didn’t you?” she rasped, pressing closer, sucking in a breath when her nerve endings screamed at the contact. “Why *don’t* you?”

“Oh, I will.” He left her breast bare and moved his hand down her body, caressing her stomach over the fabric of the dress. His fingers pressed lower, sneaking under her dress to rub at her clit through her underwear. “Maybe more than

once.”

Abby forgot to be stoic, forgot everything but the searing heat that engulfed her when Keith stroked her. “Fuck—” Her head fell back, her hair brushing her hands where he still held them. She couldn’t control her own body as her hips bucked against his hand, once and then again. The tension inside her stretched tighter and snapped, and the accompanying wave of pleasure wrenched a hoarse cry from her throat.

His fingers kept stroking and his lips returned to her ear. “Is that how you want it? Bent over, your ass in the air?”

Her knees buckled, and she sagged against the broad wall of his chest. “Please,” she whispered. “Please, God—please—”

Keith released her hands and plunged his fingers into her hair. His mouth came down on hers, but the brutal domination in his kiss had faded. He kissed her slowly this time, teasing at her lips without pressing past them. His hands moved to the zipper at the back of her dress and slowly pulled the tab, parting the teeth.

Abby licked his lips and urged his shirt up. “When is it my turn?” she asked against his mouth, the twisting need to make him gasp her name overriding everything else.

“What do you want to do?” The dress came undone and he tugged it down.

“Make you crazy.” She let him peel the dress over her

hips and kicked it away when it fell to the floor. “I want to make you beg.”

Keith grinned at her as he slowly turned her to face away from him. His hands smoothed up her arms and to her shoulders, and he nudged her upper body toward the bed. “Sounds tempting as hell, sweetheart, but that’s not how it works. Until you’re in control of yourself, you can’t be in control of anyone else.”

Her hands hit the bed and curled into the covers. She looked back at him, her brow furrowed. “That doesn’t sound very fair. I’m doing all right so far.” Except for the fact that her arms and legs were trembling, and she couldn’t quite seem to catch her breath.

One eyebrow went up as he slipped his fingers under the hem of her underwear and dragged it off of her ass. “You think we’ve even gotten *started*?”

Only in each other will they discover how to be truly free.

Puma

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Callie, a cat-shifter, is a loner by virtue of the puma that lives inside her. After a job gone bad, her very human need for contact sends her in search of the only family she has. Callie finds her foster sister in a disturbing living arrangement. Something is seriously wrong in a place where people “belong” to one man and silence is enforced to the point a seven-year-old girl pretends to be autistic.

Dev Malik thinks it’s odd to see a strange woman in the tall grass behind his house, but he doesn’t have the time to ponder why. He’s too busy trying to shelter the child and woman in his household from Scott, the control freak who lives with them.

The truth is more dangerous than Callie imagines. Scott’s control is powerfully real. And Dev’s need to protect the vulnerable is as strong as Callie’s own. Their desire is as inevitable as it is frightening, for only by looking deep within each other will they find the strength to free them all from an unspeakable evil.

Warning: This title contains explicit sex.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Puma:

Instead of replying, or even responding to her statement, his gaze dropped to her mouth. His hand slid over her shoulder, across to her neck; fingers forked up into her hair and made a fist to anchor her head so she couldn't move. His mouth was a mere breath from hers.

"I'm going to kiss you, Callie." He watched for her reaction and she didn't know if she was supposed to give a verbal yes, or not. He must have seen something to encourage him. She thought he would kiss like before: sudden, deep, all his for the taking.

His lips brushed hers and before she could protest his leaving, he returned, caught her lower lip between his gentle teeth, scraped it lightly. Like the end of this morning's kiss, but this was a beginning. A noise rose from her throat, in question, in desire, and with the fist that held her hair in his grip, he angled her head.

"God," he said, a guttural sound, before his mouth covered hers, forcing her mouth open, stroking her tongue with his. He tasted of mint and chocolate and Dev; and she tried to welcome him though all she could do was accept as he devoured her. She'd been kissed before and hadn't much liked it, hadn't liked the invasion. Dev was different, demanding, yes, but focused on her. His large hand splayed across her back, between her shoulder blades, and pushed her flush

against him so they had full-body contact. The flood of sensation, from his talented mouth—she had never felt so thoroughly kissed, his tongue demanding hers to dance, then withdrawing to explore her lips before delving in again—to the warmth of his body pressed against hers.

She actually went weak in the knees.

As she sank against him, he cupped the back of her head, holding her in that kiss, while the other arm wrapped around her waist, anchoring her to him. He slid his hand under her T-shirt and clasped her ribs, his palm and fingers warm against her skin.

His tongue released hers, and he retreated to nibble her lips. He kissed across her jawline and descended to her neck where he sucked at the sensitive skin there. Her throat vibrated, half-groan, half-purr, all pleasure. As he kissed across her collarbone, he said, “Callie, Callie. I want us to make love.”

He pulled back sharply then, as if to give himself a shake, and she reached for him, hands on his shoulders, scared he would go away. She couldn’t stand it, couldn’t take being released by him now.

He eyed her while he raised his hands to rest upon hers. For a terrible moment, she feared he was going to remove her hold on him, return to that “don’t touch” manner he sometimes projected. Instead, he caressed the backs of her hands, feather-

soft strokes of his fingertips over her knuckles, between her knuckles and, most sensitively, between her fingers. She trembled in reaction, amazed that her hands could react to his touch so. A warmth gathered in her belly.

He did lift her hands off, but linked fingers with his and brought their arms down together, pulling her up against him again. Perhaps he too craved touch despite his... She bit her lip.

“What, Callie?”

“Earlier you said you weren’t interested in sex.”

He stiffened and she closed her eyes, wishing the thought hadn’t flitted through her mind, wishing she could have lied or at least fobbed him off with a “nothing”, though it was important to her that she be honest with Dev.

She rested her face against the crook of his neck and willed him not to push her away after her reminder. When she kissed him, he shuddered. They were soft, almost chaste kisses, not like his that had ravaged her neck.

He brought her arms behind her, clasped both wrists in one large hand, while with his other, he pressed a palm against the small of her back. Her belly felt him hard against her. Aroused.

That made her smile into his neck.

“Look at me,” he demanded, so she tilted her head back to meet his gaze. “You like that, that you’ve made me hard, that you’ve made me want you?”

“Yes.” She struggled a little, which resulted in her writhing against him, but he didn’t release her arms. Lifting his free hand to her face, he held her gaze to his, palm on her cheek. With the pad of his thumb, he traced the bone just under her eye, traced her cheekbone, then ran that thumb over her lips.

“You’re beautiful.”

It made her breathe faster, these words, these intense caresses, this attention. He trailed fingers down her neck to the swell of her breast. He was watching her very carefully as he lightly palmed her breast and her sensitive nipple began to ache.

“Dev?” She wasn’t sure what she was asking.

“Hmmm?” His mouth dipped to her neck, teeth scraping the soft skin, then soothing it with a kiss. And again. His hand slipped under the hem of her T-shirt, and rose to catch her nipple between thumb and finger, rolling the nub. “Do you like that?” he murmured as he kissed her throat.

She arched against him and he swallowed her “yes”, his mouth taking hers in a punishing kiss.

Her knees gave out this time, but he caught her, finally releasing her arms, though not her mouth, as he lifted her and she wrapped herself around him. He brought her to the bed.

She tried to contain her disappointment as he set her down on the mattress. He yanked off her shirt, then his, her shorts then his, all in short order. It had been a revelation, this kind of foreplay, but now he was ready to fuck.

He crawled over her and for a moment she thought he was going to move up so he'd fuck her mouth, but he reached back and pulled her up so they were face to face again, her under him. He'd wanted to make love, she remembered, and that reassured her.

"You make me feel, Callie." The words seemed almost to be dragged from him and she touched his face, roughened because he hadn't shaved.

"I think you're beautiful too, Dev." She wanted to offer him something of her feelings, though that barely described her real emotions. Tentatively she ran a hand through his short hair, which was surprisingly soft to touch.

"Are you scared to touch me, Callie?"

"No." The question caught her off guard, and it must have shown.

"You prefer that I touch you?" He skimmed a hand down her side and across her stomach. Her underside. It made her feel vulnerable and he seemed to notice, because he crossed

his palm back and forth across her soft belly until she relaxed into the touch. "Tell me what you like," he urged.

She didn't know. He traced some ribs, but he didn't release her gaze so she said, "I like you."

He smiled then, so pleased, the smile wider than she'd observed before, like she was seeing a new Dev.

"I like everything you do. You make me feel so warm. Inside."

His slightly bemused expression made her add, "Is that wrong to say?"

"No," he said immediately. "Nothing is wrong to say." He sat back and she feared he was retreating, giving up on them making love. Perhaps because he thought she didn't like to touch him? That wasn't it, wasn't it at all. She was just so unsure, but she began to rise, to follow him.

He came back, pushing her down, lying atop her, that full-body contact she craved, though he took some of the weight with his elbows. He kissed her deeply, a kind of reassurance, then broke away and held her shoulders. "Stay here."

Again he sat up. Instead of backing away, he pulled up both her legs, ran palms over her thighs, front and back. Then calves were caressed before he wrapped his hands around her ankles to place her feet down near her butt, knees pointed up. She frowned at him and he smiled, resting hands on her knees. He pushed them apart, making her legs drop open.

She felt completely exposed and very, very wet.

“You, Callie, are going to tell me if at any time you feel *uncomfortable*, okay?”

Her chest rose and fell as he placed the heel of his palm on her pubis and rubbed lightly. Surprised, realizing she was completely ready, she arched up to push against his hand. “Dev, I want you inside me.”

Talk about getting your signals crossed...

Wolf Signs

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Granite Lake Wolves, Book 1

Robyn Maxwell doesn't care that her brother has to cancel out on their backcountry ski trip. She can do it alone. The fact she's deaf doesn't make her survival skills any weaker. The chance to get away from it all and relax in the Yukon wilderness is just what she's been craving.

Meeting wilderness guide Keil at the cabin starts cravings of another kind. Keil's one hot hunk of ripped, tasty male. Now she has to deal with raging hormones as well as strange questions about wolves and mates and challenges to the death.

Keil was trying for a nice reflective retreat before challenging for the Alpha position of his Alaskan pack. He wasn't planning on meeting the woman destined to be his mate, or finding out she's not aware she has the genes of a wolf.

Between dealing with his accident-prone younger brother, a deaf mate with an attitude and an impending duel to the death, his week—and his bed—is suddenly full.

Far from the relaxing getaway any of them had in mind...

Warning: Gives a whole new meaning to the phrase “talking with your hands”. Includes dangerous use of sarcasm and hot nookie in a remote wilderness sauna.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Wolf Signs:

Robyn shifted uncomfortably on the bench in the annex outside the sauna. Keil had gone back into the cabin with TJ and left her with the directions to relax and wait for him while he grabbed a few things. She added a couple extra logs into the stove, topped up the snow in the buckets and sat to wait.

It was damn uncomfortable to be sitting there knowing any moment a werewolf was going to walk in the door and have sex with her.

Argghhh. Even the thought made her twitch. What the hell was she doing? This was crazy. It was beyond crazy.

The door opened and Robyn jumped. Sexual heat flowed off Keil's body and reached to caress her skin.

Okay. She remembered why she was going to do this. Every inch of her was on fire and she was being drawn toward the tall, hard male as if she had ropes that twined about her limbs, trapping her. Keil dropped a blanket on the bench beside her. He glanced at her before lifting her chin with his hand.

“Hey, it's okay. Let's take this slowly.”

Robyn dropped her eyes, blushing furiously. *"I'm scared."*

"Scared of me?"

"Kind of."

His gentle hand traced over her ear and nestled in the hair at the back of her neck. *"I don't want to scare you, little bird. I want to love you."*

She lifted her eyes to his. *"I don't know what to do. I mean, I know what to do but I've never..."*

Keil wagged his eyebrows and his eyes brightened. "I know you've never. I'm glad you've never. It's good that you've never. Now I don't have to go track down your old lovers to kill them."

"Possessive much?"

"You have no idea. Yet." Keil leaned closer to brush his lips over hers. *"Wait until you are fully wolf. I bet you're going to be just as possessive about me. Wolves mate for life, and we don't like to share."*

Robyn shifted again on the hard bench. How could she want this much and still feel afraid to take the next step. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to build up her courage.

A gentle touch pulled her to her feet. *"You're thinking too hard. Let's go slow. You must be sweaty from our ski and digging up TJ. Let me help wash you up."*

Keil's hands drifted over her shoulders, pulling her up against his body for a brief caress as he reached behind her body to grasp the bottom of her long-sleeved T-shirt. With a slow fluid motion, he lifted it off her, then dropped it on the bench behind them.

As his eyes traced over her torso, Robyn fought the urge to cover her chest with her hands. Ugh. She had to decide to be seduced in a mountain cabin wearing her plainest and sturdiest underwear. Luckily Keil's face didn't seem to express any displeasure with what he saw.

And neither could Robyn complain. Keil removed his own shirt with one swift yank and stood inches away from her, his rock-solid abs tempting her fingers.

"Damn. Just...damn. Is what they mean by washboard abs? Can I do some laundry?"

Keil smiled and reached for her. Removing the tight sports bra didn't go as smoothly. In the middle of pulling it off, Keil's hand got stuck in the twist of the Y back and Robyn froze with her arms pulled over head, bra wrapping her tight with Keil's forearm. The heat rose in her face.

"Hell of a thing to happen, but don't worry. This gives us some very interesting possibilities." Keil lowered his head to press a kiss on her neck, fluttering soft kisses down over the tops of her exposed breasts, sending chills shooting through her even as he supported and stretched her arms above them.

His touch was gentle but the restrained power was there, under the surface. His tongue stroked over her skin toward her cleavage then his teeth nibbled back up the line of heat he'd created all the way to her lips. His hand was loose from her bra and she lowered her arms slowly, his hot gaze never leaving her body.

"Take off the rest and I'll get the shower ready." He spun around quickly, leaving Robyn wondering what she'd done wrong.

"Keil?"

His strong arms poured the heated water into the holding tank over the top of the shower. *"I need to cool off a bit. You're very beautiful and because you're my mate, I really, really want you. I'm trying to keep things slow here."*

After prepping the water, he placed her into the shower, turning her body until she was wet from head to toe. With a flick of the wrist, he stopped the water and picked up the washcloth and soap. Starting at the back of her neck, he rubbed small circles over her skin, covering her shoulder blades, slipping over her spine until his hands cupped both cheeks of her ass.

Robyn dropped her forehead against the side of the shower stall and closed her mind to everything but the wonderful sensations racing over her skin at his touch. The heat from the sauna warmed the side room they were in to the

point that she was comfortable even as droplets continued to cling to her skin. His mouth fastened on her neck, lapping at stray pebbles of water pooled there. Her womb clenched, releasing moisture as every stroke of his tongue sent thrills through her body to increase the desire mounting deep inside.

His touch dropped lower as Keil squatted behind her, his hands caressing down one leg. The small circular motions were driving her crazy as he teased, moving closer to the core of her heat and retreating without satisfying.

“Turn around, beautiful.”

Keil’s voice in her mind was deep and dark. It sounded like rich chocolate and Robyn was so into chocolate.

His voice made the tingles race.

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