



LUCAS

A BLACK COUGAR NOVEL

ELIZA GAYLE

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A Black Cougar novel by

ELIZA GAYLE

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Chapter One

Lucas looked around the dank cell, trying to see her. He couldn't, but he smelled the woman's fear and the stench made him sick to his stomach.

She paced back and forth outside his door. Her boots squeaked against the concrete floor with every turn, making the kind of noise that aggravated him—like nails on a chalkboard. Suddenly, she turned, stepping into the single ray of moonlight coming in through the grime-covered window, gripped the cell bars, and bared her teeth. "Gunn, you'll tell me what I want to know about your clan or suffer the consequences," she growled.

"This is getting really old, you asking the same questions over and over, me giving the same answer every time. How many days are we going to do this?"

"Until you give me the real answers, you sick son of a bitch." An untempered rage surged from her.

He rose from his cot in the corner of his private hell hole, edging his way through the dark shadows to her position. The closer he got, the more her anger pushed back at him, cementing his thoughts about her reckless behavior. Emotions seemed to drive her, making her a weaker opponent but also an unpredictable one. This close he detected something else, a subtle scent he recognized but couldn't place for the life of him. In time he would, and for now time was all he had.

"You're pushing the wrong man." She jumped back, catching herself with her hands before she landed on her ass. "I know nothing about the stupid fairytales you keep going on about. I never believed in the old Scottish lore telling of shapeshifters and magic," he purred, the words edged in steel.

The guard shook her head, her tense facial features betraying the potent rage she kept barely restrained. "I already know all about your kind as well as the existence of other clans

with different abilities.” Obvious disgust dripped from her voice. “It’s only a matter of time before I have what I want and you’ll regret not cooperating.” Her lips quirked up in a vicious smile.

The sound of gravel crunching under the tires of Kira's vehicle and the wheel jerking aimlessly in her hands shattered the vision. Her car careened off the road while her heart leaped in her throat with sudden panic as she struggled to refocus on driving and prevent a crash. She pulled at the steering wheel, trying to swerve back on the pavement. Cold liquid sloshed at her feet when her water bottle slammed to the floorboard. Nothing she tried made a difference and she ended up smashing into the soft sand embankment.

What the hell was that?

She clutched the steering wheel tightly to still her trembling arms, and sucked in air. Not only had she seen what another had, now she'd been inside his head. With the onset of her mating call, her visions had become so weird lately she didn't know what to believe anymore.

I've got to get a grip.

She reached for her other, unopened bottle, which had rolled out of sight. After searching the floor of the car, her hand finally wrapped around cool plastic underneath the front seat. She twisted the top off and gulped down the water, hoping to soothe the aching dryness of her throat.

Normally her Tallan came to her when she had specific problems to work through, enabling her to solve tense situations quickly. She'd been using her psychic gift of vision since puberty with extreme clarity, but for several days now she'd dreamt of a man she'd never met. A man who reached out to her night after night, gripping her with sexual desire so strong she'd had difficulty coping. She didn't have many details about him, but she knew, with every ounce of instinct she possessed, what he was.

Her mate.

This vision was different than the others. This hadn't been about being drawn together for hot and sweaty sex. No, he'd been locked in a cage, angry and fighting for control.

Is he really in trouble? Or are my visions deteriorating

faster than I thought?

Nothing made sense anymore. Least of all a member of their Scottish clans in trouble. They'd existed in her valley for over a century, virtually undetected, and hadn't had any lasting problems she knew of. But hell, never say never.

Kira's cell phone rang, a shrill noise that made her jump in her seat. She reached across the passenger's seat and picked it up. No need to check caller ID, she knew who was on the other end.

"Hi, Mom," she murmured.

"Kira, honey, is everything okay? I sensed a bit of trouble."

Kira rolled her eyes and inwardly groaned. "No, Mom, everything is fine. I dozed off and ended up on the side of the road, so I think I'll stop for the night and get some sleep".

"Are you all right?" She could hear the tension buzzing in her mother's voice.

"Yes, Mom. Nothing to get worried about," Kira assured her. "What about you? Has anything happened since I left?" She tried to be subtle. If someone had gone missing from one of their clans, the word should already be spreading and a hunt would likely be organized.

"No, I'm fine. I just wanted to check up on you."

With a nagging suspicion, she sensed her mom was lying. "Uh—okay then I'm going to go now and see about finding a place to stop."

"Call me when you arrive in California so I'll know you're okay."

Her mother seemed even more paranoid than usual. So not a good sign. "Bye, Mom. I'll call you tomorrow."

As she began to put the phone down, she heard her mom speak to her stepdad solemnly. "You were right, it's her time—"

Oh, just fucking great.

So much for hiding her troubles. Her stepfather was sure to run straight to the Council to inform them her mating cycle had begun. That bastard would love to see her eliminated. The clock was ticking now. She had to solve her problem, and solve it now.

* * * *

Lucas Gunn lay staring at the ceiling of his cell. He had so many unanswered questions, and his frustration tolerance had peaked hours ago. His skin burned and his muscles ached, making him afraid he wouldn't be able to hold back his shift for much longer if he didn't get his adrenaline level down.

He knew they watched his every move, he'd found the tiny cameras the first night here. So shifting in his cell was out of the question since he couldn't afford to expose his clan, and possibly several more. As Guardian, it was his duty to maintain clan secrets above all else. Time was running out, though, and eventually his body would force the shift.

The sweltering temperature inside the building left him edgy and sleep deprived. His cougar stirred, demanding release. He flung himself from the cot and stripped bare, anything to relieve the oppressive heat. Unable to resist the urge, he paced from one end of the small cell to the other. Unbidden images of cool water from a mountain stream, green grass under his paws, and a breeze rustling through his fur rose unexpectedly in his mind. All of which he forced away on a snarl of rage.

He lay back down and focused on what he must do. He'd been trying for days to find a telepathic link to one of his kind, but they were apparently too far away. Ever since the binding spell the fucking witch had used to capture him, he'd only found one person to reach: his mystery woman. The sexy redhead that came to him every time he slept. The only thing he knew for sure about her was the fact that she drove him wild with lust, and if he ever laid hands on her she'd be in all kinds of trouble.

Lucas let down his barriers, opening his mind to any psychic residue that could lead him to a connection with someone able to help. Closing his eyes and relaxing his body one muscle at a time, he willed himself to drift into sleep.

* * * *

Lucas glanced across the room, his attention drawn to the beautiful woman standing in the doorway. Ah, she was back. Her shoulder-length, russet hair had multi-colored highlights of red and gold that shimmered under the lights. He wanted to run his fingers through the thick strands and watch them dance as the

soft silk brushed against his skin.

She wore a simple tank top and running shorts that may have looked drab on anyone else, but they hugged and skimmed her lush figure to perfection.

As she turned to scan the room, he caught a glimpse of a delectable, full ass that caused his groin to tighten. Compelled to learn more about this woman, he pushed himself off the wall where he lounged. Sure he wanted her identity, but they both knew without a doubt it was lust guiding their actions here.

Turning, she met his gaze, and her blue eyes sparkled with awareness.

Neither attempted to break eye contact as Lucas stepped in front of her. "I'm glad you're back."

She tilted her head and stared at him as if trying to find an answer to an unknown puzzle. "Do you know why I'm here? And where is here, by the way?"

Her voice flowed like warm oil across his skin, and Lucas wondered what he could say to keep her from turning around and walking out of his dream. He stepped closer, absorbing the heat radiating from her and inhaling her sweet, musky scent. That was one heightened sense he loved dearly because there was nothing else like the scent of an aroused female.

His heart rate accelerated as he spoke. "You're here because I called for you, but I'm not sure where here is. Nothing looks familiar. Maybe neutral ground for us?"

"Then tell me why?" she whispered.

Her eyes glowed with a heady mix of confusion and desire, a look that stirred his blood, and one he'd become accustomed to during their visits. She wanted him, that was obvious, yet she held herself back from him. Her lips pursed together, so full and ripe his mind immediately wandered to thoughts of them wrapped around his cock while she knelt in front of him, her hands tied behind her back. A good and proper submissive position.

"Maybe we need each other." He couldn't resist reaching up and lightly stroking her mouth. She gasped at his touch, but her eyes burned with unmistakable lust, further confirming his belief she might welcome his brand of control. Brushing his lips against hers for a quick taste, Lucas found himself unable to stop

from grazing those soft lips with his tongue.

His mind screamed for him to ask for her help, but for the life of him he couldn't remember why. She sighed, parting her lips just enough to allow him inside the warm recess of her mouth where he stroked the tip of her tongue with his own.

Tension rippled along his skin when she shuddered in response. He deepened the kiss and grasped her hips, dragging her against his body so she could feel exactly what she did to him.

She tasted sweet and tart at the same time, just like his favorite candy, Sweet Tarts. His hands slid up her torso, slipping underneath her thin tank, reveling in her soft, smooth skin. Pulling back from her lips, his gaze slowly traveled to the swell of her round, pert tits rising and falling in rhythm with her rough breathing. They were perfect for his hands, just enough to fill them. Her nipples were as enticing as ripe berries and hardened to tight points under his gaze. She liked that. He rolled one between his thumb and forefinger before giving a tight, testing pinch. A low moan sounded in her throat as she arched her back, pushing her breasts harder into his hands.

She twisted in his arms, gasping for breath. "What are we doing?"

He tried to find the right answer. How to explain the unexplainable, the why of his primal lust? Instead, his lips were drawn back to hers for a hard, demanding kiss. His need to possess consumed him as he plundered her warm, wet mouth.

He paused long enough to breathe. "I don't know. I can't seem to stop. Does it matter?"

She stole another kiss by thrusting her own tongue between his lips for an exploration of her own. Tunneling her hands through his hair, she gripped it tight and tugged him closer. The pleasure of her kiss was so good, licking at his skin until he thought he might burn in it.

He wanted her, and he wasn't about to fight it. Thrusting against her pussy, his cock begged for release. The fabric from his pants and hers connected to increase the friction against his sensitive skin, heating him further as a shudder coursed through his body. More skin. He needed to touch more of her skin. Now.

"At least tell me your name."

“Lucas,” he bit out, unable to focus.

He clawed at her tank, pushing it upward and over her head. He trailed his tongue down her neck, his teeth nipping at the tender skin before latching on to one of her large, ruby-red nipples, sucking it in deep. He let everything about her fill his senses, her sweet taste and the heady scent of her arousal filled the air around them.

** * * **

Her knees buckled in weakness. “Oh, God.” The heated pleasure was so much more than she’d expected. The sensations from his teeth and tongue arrowed straight to her pussy, making her ache for him to fuck her as long and as hard as he could. She reached down to remove her shorts, eager for him to touch her all over.

He grabbed her wrists to still her movements and slid down in front of her so his head was even with her bare belly. The indentation mocked him until he leaned forward and swirled his tongue inside the tiny button.

“I want the pleasure of revealing your treasures,” he whispered. He flipped her around and roughly pushed her against the nearby wall.

“What are you—”

“Shh. You have nothing to fear from me,” he interrupted. “I won’t hurt you...much.”

The excitement of his words throbbed in her clit, increasing the tension of her need.

He grasped her shorts and silk panties and, in one smooth move, had them down around her ankles.

His finger traced the seam of her bottom, dipping perilously close to her wet, ready slit. “You have such a beautiful ass. I can’t wait to run my tongue all over every inch and sink my teeth into your flesh.”

The temptation he offered had Kira panting for breath as she tried to focus on getting air in and out of her lungs while quivering in need. If he did the things to her he described, she didn’t think she would survive.

Large, calloused hands grasped her cheeks, parting them

for his first intimate look at her. She sucked in a deep breath—waiting. When his fingers wandered to the lips of her pussy, her body throbbed under the fiery touch of his hands, heating her to boil.

She gasped out the breath she'd been holding. Never in her life had a man taken the time to inspect her body with such intimate scrutiny. Expecting the usual complaints that her butt was too big and her breasts too small, her spine stiffened. Despite her self-consciousness about his actions, and unable to breathe or voice her fears, Kira was helpless to the way he made her feel and couldn't stop his sexual invasion even if she wanted to. She didn't!

His fingers grazed her slippery folds, sending little shivers of delight straight through her core. She nearly came undone when the tip of his finger touched her clit.

"God, you're so hot and wet for me, aren't you? I can already taste your sweet juices coating my tongue." She tensed slightly. "No, baby. Just relax and don't be afraid," he whispered.

"You don't even know who I am."

"I know everything I need to at the moment. Your body fits perfectly in my hands and you're so damned sweet. Let go and allow me to show you just how far pleasure can go."

He sank a finger into her pussy, stroking slowly. In. Out. In and out. Leaving her incapable of doing anything other than moan and writhe from the pleasure. When he added a second, and then a third finger to her aching heat, the fullness stroked her sensitive walls. Without pausing the full-force finger fucking, Lucas stood to his full height, rubbing her naked body with his still fully-clothed form. The delicious rough friction of the material against her bare skin edged her one step closer to bliss.

He removed his fingers from her tight sheath, and small whimpers of protest sounded in her throat. He distracted her by lightly scraping the curve of her neck with his teeth, further inflaming her desperate need.

Circling her clit, she cried out for more. Her back arched and her bottom opened for the finger he slid between the cheeks of her ass. He rubbed her own juices around the puckered opening for lubrication before gently pushing one finger into her

ass one knuckle at a time. Stars exploded behind her eyes, her body quivered, and she screamed out and shook with the strongest orgasm of her life.

* * * *

Lucas jolted awake.

“What the fu—not again!” he roared, his chest slick with sweat, his breathing harsh and uneven.

He stroked his throbbing cock, certain he was going to explode if he didn’t come soon.

On a sigh, Lucas leaned back and wondered who the mysterious redhead he continued to dream about was. He had to find her, make it real.

Despite knowing he was being watched, he continued to move his hand up and down his rigid shaft while considering how it would feel if his mystery woman rocked her backside against him as his cock pushed into her tight slit. Warm, wet flesh sucking him inside.

Near completion, the familiar rush of sparks raced across his skin, along with the tickling of fur beginning to come out on his arms. He willed himself not to change, but couldn’t stop—didn’t want to stop—his orgasm. On the final image of her wicked smile, his seed spurted from his engorged cock, subduing the beast, he looked directly into the camera with a feral grin, knowing that he’d once again prevented the change and thus disappointed his captors. He experienced a moment of relief, but it wouldn’t be enough for long. He needed to escape soon and find this woman who tormented his sleep. Everything about her called to him. His need to dominate and control her grew with every night’s dream and the moment he was free there would be no stopping the beast.

* * * *

Kira startled awake the next morning when the sun slanted across her face from the open window, momentarily confused about her whereabouts and what had happened. As the fog of sleep faded away, she remembered checking into the motel.

She lay there, reliving her dream from the night before of the sensual man who would be her mate. Standing in front of her, his broad, muscular body had eclipsed her athletic frame, and he must have easily reached six-four. Despite the tired expression she'd seen from her first vision, his gold and green eyes had sparked with energy and lust. Her pussy tingled again as she considered the feelings she had experienced while dreaming and how much longer she could last without him touching her. *I don't want it to be this way. There should be a choice.* But the deep burn of need and desire wouldn't let go just because her brain said so.

"Lucas," she whispered aloud. Remembering him as the man she'd seen in her vision just before her car crash, she became convinced, more than ever, that her powers were fucked.

With the heavy weight of responsibility pressing down on her shoulders, Kira rose to shower and dress before she hit the road again. She didn't want these feelings or the obligation that came with them. She already had a life she needed to get back to. One that wouldn't wait very long for her return.

While brushing her teeth, Kira reexamined her vision from the day before. The cell Lucas had been in seemed familiar, military style. Hard to miss with all the sea foam green walls. She closed her eyes, summoning the exact image she'd seen. Once there, she glanced around, hoping to find clues that would tell give her a possible location.

Part of her training as a Marine Corps intelligence officer had required her to become familiar with most military bases and their brig facilities. There was a damn good chance she'd seen it. She focused on a wall outside the cell door where the guard stood.

Noticing some faint writing, she struggled to zoom in on the spot. Navajo inscriptions, she realized.

"Fort Wingate!" Impossible. Officially, Fort Wingate had been closed for almost fifteen years, but it was occasionally used for missile testing, and a civilian contractor did some work there for the government. However, there were no day-to-day military operations and certainly no policing activities going on.

To Kira, this simply provided more damning evidence she really was losing her mind, and the rate of the loss was

accelerating rapidly. Sexual dream walking with her intended mate she understood, but envisioning the same man being held prisoner by the military and hidden away in a deserted facility was a little over the top, even for her.

She had to get a grip and figure out how to regain control. It wouldn't be long before the council hunted her down, and she didn't want to go before them and plead her case. Having a group of elders who knew little about her decide whether she was fit to live or die was unacceptable. She'd always found their system of determining when a clan member was a threat to the safety and secrets within rather archaic. Their rules for the onset of the mating call provided only one way to escape death. Find your mate and perform the bonding ritual.

She picked up her bag and slammed her belongings inside. Time to get back on the road and put as much distance between her and home as possible. Until she found an alternative solution she wouldn't make it easy for anyone to find her.

"I choose to live on my terms, and nobody else gets to say different," she declared.

* * * *

Kira knew better than to stop, but seeing the exit sign for Fort Wingate as she traveled along I-40, she couldn't seem to help herself. Night quickly approached, and she wasn't prepared to be caught trespassing on government property. *I'll just nose around a little to prove to myself there's nothing there.* Then she could get back on the road without the nagging doubts.

At the front gate, she noticed a sign posted that all visitors must report to Building 204 to register. Since her presence on any base would be questioned, she decided to bypass check-in and take the back service road that circled behind the facility where the brig would be located. Explaining to clueless security why she needed to be here in the first place could be a little awkward. Even she wouldn't have believed herself.

About a mile into the base, she spotted the sign indicating the Brig straight ahead. She opted to park her car several buildings away and approach the building on foot.

Just in case.

Before getting out of her car, she considered grabbing her Glock from the glove compartment but decided carrying her non-military issue weapon on a military base would be borrowing trouble she couldn't afford. Not to mention a little too paranoid; besides, her military-approved Sig was strapped to her calf, concealed by her jeans.

She approached the back of the Brig and immediately noticed dusty, dark windows boarded up tight. Layers of grime gave the building a depressed and creepy look. The facility appeared unused and abandoned, but she reached out anyway to try the rear door, and caught a glimpse of something from the corner of her eye. Bending down, she picked up a cigarette butt that didn't look fifteen years old. She sniffed it. Freshly burned tobacco.

Still doesn't mean anything. Employees could walk by here while on their smoke break. The nagging sense of something off tingled across her scalp and she shook it off, checked the door and confirmed it was indeed locked tight.

In search of conclusive evidence, she crept around the side of the building headed in the direction of the front door. As she neared the front of the structure, the hairs on the back of her neck stood up, stopping her dead in her tracks. Her senses screamed now, something wasn't right here. She rubbed the base of her neck, rolling her head to loosen up the muscles. Her internal warnings were no joking matter and had saved her ass more than once. She inched forward with a lot more caution and in-depth observation, and surveyed the area around the building. Still she saw and heard nothing, but her senses were on alert, and would not be ignored. With that in mind, she proceeded to the front door.

* * * *

Lucas sensed someone close by but didn't recognize the scent. He sat up on his cot, testing for a telepathic link. Easily broached, he wandered undetected through the stranger's mind and spoke softly. *Who are you and why are you here?*

Her shock at his voice in her head reverberated through his own mind like a short stab with a needle as she frantically

searched for a reason someone had so easily slipped inside her shields, she went stock-still and answered his question. *I could ask you the same question but more importantly, get out of my head.*

He laughed at her anger yet her voice soothed and calmed his nerves, a natural balm to his restless nature. Tempted to drag out the conversation, the sudden rapid rise of her heartbeat alarmed him. *Who are you?*

I'm Captain Akira MacDonald, U.S. Marines. I'm here checking into the unauthorized use of this facility.

Suspicious by nature and circumstance, Lucas assumed they had sent a new female soldier in yet another lame attempt of getting him to cooperate.

Sorry, sweetheart, but sending you in here isn't going to change a thing. I'll tell you the same thing I told the last one. Although... I could use a good fuck. Lucas faltered when her bitter anger washed over him like a wave. No use getting dragged in by someone new. He closed the mind link to her and lay back down with a satisfied smirk he knew the cameras would pick up.

The bastards should know better by now.

* * * *

Fury surged through her. Kira had come out of her way to find out if someone from her society had been kidnapped, and this was the thanks she got. She had half a mind to turn around and leave him here, show him just where his arrogance would get him. But if he ended up being what she thought he was, they had bigger problems than just the two of them. She'd have to get him out of here.

The familiar tingle erupted in Kira's ears as magic surged through her mind, begging for release. When she finally succumbed to the call, her arms flung wide and the locked door burst open. Not wanting to be discovered by any guards, she quickly ducked inside, and closed the door behind her.

Might have thought of that before you made all that racket with the door. His voice whispered along the edge of her mind, unsettling her further.

Shut up. I need to concentrate.

A low chuckle sounded in response. She took a deep breath to fortify her shields and kick him out of her head before proceeding.

She attempted to get her bearings in the darkened room while she listened for any telltale signs of where he might be, as well as any guards. With an ego like his, she decided, Lucas couldn't resist speaking to her again, but he surprised her when he said nothing.

"I came here to investigate," Kira whispered. No response. "Why are you being held? Have you committed a crime?" She waited and listened. "You can't stay here, it's too risky." Still she heard nothing. No breathing, no movement. No signs of life within the room.

Strange.

To investigate further, she crept forward, feeling her way in the darkened room. Her hand came in contact with the cold steel bars. She'd found the cell but had no idea which direction led to the door or where Lucas might be hiding within.

By instinct and touch, she located the cell door in minutes. She inhaled deeply. Entering the cell could be a big mistake as what waited inside for her was still a mystery. But a force stronger than her will compelled her forward. Again she concentrated on the lock, and her magic worked its way inside until the cell door slid open. Gripping the bars tightly, she started to move inside.

"Who are you and why are you here?" His menacing voice reached out to her, accompanied by a low growl, coming from the far corner from where she stood.

"I already told you who I am and I'm not here to hurt you, only to find out information," she assured him. *Maybe this wasn't such a hot idea after all.*

"Darling, I'm not worried about you hurting me. I just don't feel like playing your game." His mocking tone grew stronger as he moved toward her, stopping mere inches from her body. Though his closeness made her uncomfortable, she refused to back down and give him the satisfaction of thinking he scared her.

With a brief thought to her weapon, she leaned forward and

whispered in his ear, “I don’t play games with strange men, so you can back off with the macho alpha-male crap.”

* * * *

Her breath skittered across his skin, and he lost focus for a moment, forgetting for an instant that she was his enemy. Instead, he fought an urge to take her to the ground, pin her arms to the cold concrete floor, and fuck her as hard as he could. The animal wanted free and the raging hard-on pressing painfully against his zipper made it damned difficult to control the beast.

Her scent invading his nostrils had a spicy tang with a definite musk of arousal undertone, reminding him of his recent dreams and something else, something from a long time ago. He tried to get a good look at her, but even his enhanced vision couldn’t see past her silly ball cap in the darkness.

While admiring her bitch-in-heat scent, he began to formulate a plan. She’d left the cell door unlocked with no guard in sight. Unlike him, she appeared to be having difficulty seeing in the dark, which made it ridiculously easy to grab her and use her as a hostage to get out of this godforsaken place. Maybe too easy.

After allowing himself about fifteen seconds to decide a course of action, he flexed his forearms and his nails lengthened without a sound into lethally sharp weapons. He grabbed her arms, spun her around, and pulled her compact body flush up against his while placing his claws so precisely around her neck she couldn’t move without him slicing into her flesh. Instinctually she fought back until his claw pierced her skin enough to draw blood. The metallic scent filled the dank air, igniting his hunger. His vision hazed for a few brief seconds while he fought the instinct to dip down and tongue the blood from her neck, and instead forced himself to focus. He was in control here.

She hissed through clenched teeth, “What the hell are you doing?”

“Sorry, hon, but it looks like you’re my ticket out of here.”

“Why? What have you done?”

The honey sweet smell of her fear mixed with the pungent

odor of her anger permeated his senses. A momentary twinge of regret knotted in his stomach for having to involve her or hurt her, but this was his only chance to escape.

“The only thing I’m guilty of is trusting the wrong person.” And he couldn’t wait to gain his freedom to begin the search for his betrayer. “I only need to use you to get out of here, and then I can let you go.” Her body tensed in his arms, and he suspected she was planning to make a move against him. “Look, if you just cooperate, this will be quick and painless.” He waited for her to answer.

“I thought I was coming here to help you, asshole, but clearly you’re not the man I thought you were.”

Her response made no sense, but he suspected it was simply a ploy to confuse him. His captors had tried every method of torture and coercion to break him, but they had to be feeling seriously desperate when they’d sent this woman.

“Let’s go.” He prodded her forward in short steps.

* * * *

While Lucas walked her out of the cell, Kira nudged the Tallan to scan the nearby area for guards or any other people. He foolishly thought he was taking her against her will, but she knew the truth, and she’d play along to see where it led them for a while. Her neck already throbbed from the small slice of his claw, and delaying their departure with hand-to-hand combat wasn’t a smart tactical move. Truth be told, it wasn’t just the danger that had her worried—being this close to Lucas lit her body like gas on dried kindling. It was unsettling to say the least. Shaking her head, she refocused on the task at hand, their connection would have to wait until they were in the free and clear.

For some strange reason, she found no one around. That simple fact had her internal warning blaring for attention. Something was off, but she couldn’t take the time to analyze it now. They needed to get out before anyone returned, or worse, had time to attack. When they walked out the door of the facility, Kira noticed Lucas checking every detail around him for any sign of trouble. She’d bet anyone would be hard pressed to get

anything by him. Capturing him must have been a real bitch.

Despite her annoyance over him believing he could actually kidnap her, she couldn't help but admire his physique. The muscles of his torso rippled against her back with every lithe move he made. When he pulled her down in a crouch to stay hidden, he seemed every inch a predator waiting for his prey.

He turned to her, his mouth open to say something, and he froze. His eyes narrowed, dilated, and for an instant, time stood still as she watched the awareness dawn in his gaze. Those dark eyes pinned her in place and sparks shot through her at the uncontrollable lust coursing in her veins. She licked her lips nervously and bit her bottom lip as he continued his intense perusal.

"How is this possible?" he asked.

Kira closed her eyes and took a steady breath. Obviously her suspicions had been correct. They'd walked through the dreams together, and from the telling way he devoured her with his gaze, he remembered every sensual minute. Her face flushed with heat as the memories of what they'd done every night this week became a little more real.

She parted her lips to respond, but he covered them with his own, the reality of his possession of her mouth even more intoxicating than she had dreamed. He thrust his tongue inside, and the fervent pressure of his lips against hers started a throbbing between her legs. He pulled her across his lap where his rapidly growing arousal pressed into her buttocks. Despite the potential for danger, she melted into his arms.

His hands roamed everywhere—along her spine, caressing her shoulders before finally sinking into her thick hair where he gripped a handful and jerked her off his lips. She yelped from the shock and pain of his action.

"What the hell is going on here?"

Before Kira could respond, she was startled by an alternate image forming in her mind. "Someone's coming," she murmured. He dropped her from his lap, leaping away from her into a defensive crouch to listen.

She grabbed his hand and wordlessly tried to pull him toward her hidden car. He didn't budge.

"Look, pal, unless you want us both to be caught, you need

to trust me. I have a car nearby that we can use, but if we don't go now, the well-armed bitch you're so fond of will be here."

He stared at her for a moment, "I don't trust anyone but myself, so don't think for a second you can play me."

She dropped his hand, pulled her handgun from the ankle holster, and took off for her car. She'd leave the bastard behind if that's the way he wanted to *play* it.

Play. More anger rolled from her in waves as she fled to the car.

* * * *

From a quarter of a mile away, in the corporate offices, Malcolm felt a tingling down his spine, a sure sign of trouble. He sensed a change in his brother that couldn't be good. He reached across the desk to phone the guards. "What's happening with our subject?"

"There seems to be a problem, sir." Malcolm heard a slight tremble in the guard's voice when he answered, and some shouting in the background. "While Lara was taking a quick break, your prisoner disappeared."

A white-hot rage erupted within him, the nature of his beast calling out to him from its prison as he savored the idea of killing the guard on the phone. Pain seized his gut when the animal hit the wall holding him in. Malcolm took some deep, calming breaths and temporarily banked down his angry desires. There would be time for that later. These days he had a new outlet for that aggression.

"You and your team should begin reviewing the security tapes immediately, and send Lara to my office right now. I will deal with this breach myself."

Damn that woman. Will she never fucking listen to me? I warned her that my brother was clever and cunning beyond her comprehension. She'd insisted her magic would hold him. Good thing I anticipated something like this would happen and took proper measures. In the meantime, when that bitch gets here, she'll have to earn my forgiveness with her hot mouth and pray I let her live.

God, he was already hard just from thinking about her

punishment. He would have to beat her, punish her for her continued failures, and if she could take it without begging for him to stop, he'd reward her by stuffing his cock in her wanting mouth. His body tingled with the anticipation of pleasure those images conjured as he began taking his belt off.

Chapter Two

Lucas was in shock. He couldn't believe the woman from his dreams sat beside him. Now, as they traveled down the highway, he tried to figure out what the hell to do next. Her hands gripped the steering wheel a little too tight, and her mouth pursed in a thin, straight line. Her silence left him unsure whether she was frightened or pissed. He scented a little of both, but couldn't tell which emotion controlled her at the moment.

"Where to?" she asked.

Back at the base, he'd managed to snag her shirt as she ran and wrestle her to the ground just before she reached her car. Their brief tussle ended with a carefully placed claw to remind her who was in charge, then her handing over her gun, which now sat on the floorboard as far away from her as possible. That she carried such a sweet weapon impressed and intrigued him.

"Keep going east on I-40 and I'll let you know." He stretched and shifted his legs, trying to get comfortable in her tiny car.

"Are you going to make me drive all the way back to North Carolina?"

He opened his eyes and gazed at her curiously. *Fuck. She knows where I'm from, what else does she know? What is her game?* Giving up on comfort, he straightened to an upright position on the seat.

"Where do you think I'm leading you to?" he demanded. It was all he could do to concentrate on his plan when it was her lips that captured much of his attention. Plump and slightly parted, she alternately licked them or bit at them with her teeth. Both actions made his dick grow bigger.

The ache to kiss her again overwhelmed him, made the need to discover exactly how urgent and real his dreams had been. He leaned over and whispered in her ear, "What do you want from

me, Akira MacDonald of the U.S. Marines?”

Her shuddering response brought a smile to his face. Nice to see he didn't suffer alone and the attraction went both ways.

“What makes you think I want anything? Well, other than my freedom, of course.”

“There is that...”

He relaxed back in the seat, putting some space between them, and began formulating a plan to get back home. He was far enough away from his captors he could likely leave her and get there on his own, but something about her nagged at him, something suspiciously like...nah, that couldn't be. His gaze wandered back to her, drinking in her appearance through hooded eyes. He admired the strong lines of her face, the petite nose above full, lush lips he already knew were kissable and he wondered, why this woman and why now? Why would he have dreams about a stranger who wanted to not only use him, but likely kill him?

He could close his eyes and will her image out of his head, but there was nothing to save him from her scent. The fresh and sweet smell that wouldn't leave him. This was one of those rare times he cursed his abilities.

So he watched her.

Her breasts rose gently with each breath she took, and he wondered if her nipples would pucker and swell as he'd dreamt. Or turn instantly hard when he kissed her? Damn, his agony worsened as his cock tightened beyond anything he had experienced before. No, he wouldn't be letting her go yet. Not until he tasted her, savored her. Then he'd slide inside her and feel her slick heat tighten around him. Yeah, he needed her and, one way or another, it would be soon.

* * * *

Kira felt his gaze on her body, studying her as surely as if his hands roamed her curves. She didn't want to admit just how hot she burned for him but, with the nagging thought of going mad without him touching her, she couldn't exactly deny it. Heat burned inside her while she struggled to think of something else. How could she feel this way about an arrogant jerk who made no

secret of both his dislike for and his willingness to fuck her? She tried to nudge herself into his thoughts, but his barriers against her were impossible to penetrate. *Who the hell is he? How come I can't get in?*

Despite the tension between them, her stomach growled like a starved bear.

"Akira, when was the last time you ate something? You're growling at me."

"It's just Kira. Nobody calls me Akira. And yes, I'm famished," she mumbled. *For more than just food, though.*

"We should stop soon. You've been driving for hours. There's an exit coming up with restaurants and hotels. We'll stop there for the night."

Her stomach flipped. A hotel? Since he was still under the misguided impression he'd kidnapped her, he'd probably insist on only one room. Wicked thoughts of being alone with her dream man filled her head, all of which featured one or both of them naked. If he took off any more clothes, no way could she be held responsible for what happened. *Can I possibly resist him? Do I want to?* "Sounds like a plan. I'm definitely ready for a break and some food."

She pulled the car on the exit ramp and headed in the direction of the Denny's. She had to get out of the car as quickly as possible. She needed space between them before she did something she knew she'd regret.

Once parked, she climbed from the car and raised to her tiptoes to stretch and move her stiffened limbs. The long ride cramped her muscles and it felt so good to move. Mid-stretch, she glanced at Lucas and found him staring at her. Her skin tingled under the examination and a steady throb quickened her sex. She doubted even space would keep them apart at this rate.

"You ready?" His question came out gruff and unsteady.

Kira bit her top lip to hold back the smile at his surliness. *Guess Mr. Macho Alpha man has a weakness, too.* She nodded and headed for the entrance. Now she only had to decide whether she could risk letting him get close.

At the door she stopped to let a family of four pass by. Lucas' arm brushed against her back, sending a sudden streak of pleasure zipping through her. She sucked in a sharp, deep breath

as her skin tingled and heated.

This is going to be a long night.

* * * *

Lucas studied Kira's backside as she followed the waitress to a table. He couldn't ever remember seeing a finer ass wrapped in tight denim. Her skirt rose up when she slid sideways into the booth first, giving him a quick flash of tempting black lace. Forcing himself to turn away from her bare thighs, he took the spot across from her and caught her watching with interest. She gave him a small smile, and for one brief unguarded moment he saw a different woman. Not the one of his dreams or the trained soldier, but instead a softer side he longed to discover. His gaze focused on her soft, pink lips and the straight, white teeth nibbling on the corner of her lower lip every time she sucked it in.

He picked up his own menu and tried to concentrate on the words printed in front of him and not the lush mouth he wanted to devour.

"What can I get you?" The waitress looked between them expectantly.

"I'll take the French toast platter with extra bacon and some hot chocolate with extra whipped cream, please."

He looked at her in surprise.

"What? I'm hungry."

Shaking his head, he laughed, charmed beyond belief by the smile she kept flashing. After he ordered his own hearty breakfast, he waited until the waitress walked off before he lifted his eyes to Kira again.

He turned her way and their gazes locked onto each other. This time there was no cute smile but, instead, a look of pure heat and curiosity. Her tongue darted out to lick her bottom lip and the urge to swipe his own tongue across her swept over him. The simple fact of her proximity threatened his ability to stay aloof. His cock twitched in his pants and he gripped the edge of the seat he sat on to keep from dragging her across the table and kissing her senseless.

"Why were you being held?"

She didn't mince words when she wanted to know something. Hard not to admire that.

"You really don't know? Seriously, don't they tell you people anything?"

She opened her mouth to say something and must have changed her mind as she shut it and said nothing.

Her expression changed, closed down, and he felt bad for being a smart ass, even though he had no reason to feel that way.

"Why don't we talk about something else?" Something safe maybe.

"Like what?"

Her question brought to mind every dirty thought he'd tried to push away. What would she say if he told her all he really wanted to do right now was lay her out in front of him, spread her legs wide, and feast on her instead of the food they'd ordered? He imagined she tasted even sweeter than the scent of her arousal that continued to torment him. He shifted uncomfortably on the bench, grateful for the cover of the table.

"What about the—"

"Here ya go, sugar. Your French toast and hot chocolate, and your omelet and coffee." She set the plates of steaming food in front of them and flashed a real friendly smile to him. "Can I get you anything else?"

She didn't even bother to look at Kira this time, but he did. "Need anything else?" he asked.

She shook her head, casting her eyes on her food.

"I guess we're all set then." With his thoughts consumed by the urge to touch her, he reached across the table and covered Kira's hand with his own, dismissing the waitress. When their skin touched, he forgot about everything except her. Her heat reignited his barely cooled lust until his body burned to claim her.

"Lucas, I—I need my hand to eat." Her whisper caught his attention and he realized he'd been holding her too tight. He loosened his fingers and pulled back. She appeared calm, but he heard the acceleration of her heartbeat as she picked up her fork and worked at cutting her breakfast into small bites.

Her movements mesmerized him. When she lifted her fork to sample the food, her mouth formed the perfect O as she took it

all inside and clamped her lips around the utensil. Withdrawing the fork, she left behind a dusting of powdered sugar and a few drops of sugary syrup on her bottom lip. All of which he wanted to lick off for her.

Blood roared in his ears as she repeated the process over and over. Since he couldn't take his eyes off of her, his own food laid untouched.

"You not hungry anymore?"

"Not really."

"That's too bad. It's really good." She licked the last of the sugar from her lips, picked up her cocoa, and lapped at the whipped cream. The damn woman tempted him to his core, which here in public was not the best of ideas.

A low growl sounded from his throat before he could think to stop it, and her gaze shot to his. Questioning him.

"It's time to go."

"Why? What's wrong?"

Lucas flipped through his wallet, grabbed some bills, and threw more than enough on the table to cover their meal and tip before grabbing her hand and dragging her from the restaurant.

"But I wasn't finished!"

He simply growled in response.

When they stepped outside the diner, Lucas drug the cool night air into his lungs searching for his control. Only two things could happen right now: shift or fuck. Neither option seemed viable until he noticed the woods across the road. The urge to change and go for a run crawled up his body, taking over and making his skin too tight. He inhaled the clean scent of pine trees, the musky earth, and various small wildlife.

He yearned to run free again. To be at home in his mountains where he didn't have to watch his back with every move and worry as much about exposing secrets. It had been too long. He crossed the street and headed for the cover of trees and shrubs, away from the busy restaurant and cars. Without considering the consequences, he allowed the familiar prickling of his skin as the changes rushed across him, fur quickly covering his arms. A branch snapping behind him reverberated through him like a gunshot, startling him back from his selfish thoughts as he realized what he'd almost done. He'd been about

to change in front of the enemy. The very thing he'd fought against all these weeks. After taking a few moments to regain control over his traitorous body, he turned to face Kira.

Her eyes were wide and full of questions, yet she said nothing. Did she already know what he was or would it shock her to see him turn into a wild beast? While carefully watching her responses, Lucas motioned behind him. "There's a pathway across the street. Do you feel up to a short walk in the woods?" Surprisingly, he didn't smell fear on her at his request, and her heartbeat had only increased a few beats per minute.

"Yes, please. I'm not ready to get back into that car again or go inside anytime soon. I'd love some fresh air myself. And then I'd like to know what the hell happened back there."

He snorted. "You like the woods?"

"Grew up in them. There were miles and miles of unspoiled beauty back home I could roam and play in. Loved getting lost so much I took to disappearing for days. Drove my mother berserk."

His chest clenched at the genuine smile of happiness her memory created. "Where at?" Kira's smile faded and he realized he'd pushed too far.

"A long way from here."

He waited for her to reveal more, but her face remained closed. Stepping forward, he gripped her hand and led the way deep into the woods. The instant he touched her a connection sizzled between them, sending heat throughout his limbs. His body reacted, growing taut with desire. Once again the urge to take her in every possible way consumed his thoughts. Time or place no longer mattered. Pure, primal need for her coursed through him.

What is wrong with me? Since when can't I control myself with a woman? Especially this one.

He knew she'd been sent to draw information from him. Just how far would she go to succeed in her mission?

She was obviously telepathic, what other abilities did she possess? He wanted to focus on the anger those thoughts created, but the animal clawed into his gut to get out when he did. Something he couldn't allow. So he'd focus on the woman—the sassy woman he'd glimpsed in the diner, the one who spoke of

spending her childhood in the woods.

Kira abruptly stopped and whirled around to face him. “You’re wrong about me you know,” she blurted out. “I’m not who you think I am.” Despite the nervous the way she bounced from foot to foot, her eyes blazed, daring him to challenge her.

Her lush mouth mesmerized him. Lucas couldn’t focus on what she’d been saying over the roaring rush of blood in his sensitive ears. Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips. The memory of that tongue pressed to his skin flashed through his mind and his entire body tightened further. He fought the urges until lust seeped from every pore and he snapped.

He grabbed her shoulders and crushed her against his chest.

“What—” Before she could finish, he took her mouth with a rough, demanding kiss. He thrust his tongue past her teeth and devoured her taste, reveling in the silken warmth. Stroking into her heat, he gave up fighting the need anymore. His beast wouldn’t be denied. Lucas wanted her more than his next breath and, by damn, he was going to have her. Now.

* * * *

The hardness of his chest pushed up against her breasts and his heat burned straight through to her skin. She wanted his cock buried deep inside her.

Now.

She grabbed his hair and tried to pull him closer as their kiss became frantic. He bit at her lips then stroked her with his rough, textured tongue. She thought about trying to stop—this was too soon, too fast—but when Lucas lifted her skirt and ripped her panties away from her trembling body, she lost the last of her doubts.

“The scent of your arousal is enough to make a grown man weep and beg. Tell me to stop. Make me believe you’re pussy isn’t dripping wet with need.”

She trembled in his arms. Words couldn’t form so she shook her head instead. Here with the heat of his body pressed against her, a wicked lust visible on his face, she could forget about the future. She needed this pleasure, and when it was over she’d exorcise him from her dreams and be done with him.

Helplessly, with no control to stop herself, she arched her back, urging him on.

“This time it’s not a dream. Are you ready for that?” He moved closer, his teeth grazing her jaw line in the direction of her ear. “You smell wild and sweet, like the mountain forest after a soaking rain. I love the rain.”

He sank two fingers inside her and started pumping in and out with agonizing slowness, driving her mad.

“Akira, baby, I ache for this. I’ve tried to resist but I just can’t. I’ve suffered with the scent of your need filling my head. It’s driving me crazy, but I won’t take you until you tell me.” He hesitated, waiting for her response. He looked into her eyes, demanding her answer.

Hunger raged between them and, when she didn’t answer right away, he thumbed her clit. Her body jolted, arching into his hand, striving to find the hard pressure that would satisfy her ache. He needed to quit toying with her and get on with it already.

Her breath caught in her throat when his fingers hit the sweet spot inside her. “Please, Lucas. Please.” She couldn’t fight, not the pleasure, not him. It consumed her.

“Please what, baby?” He delved further, scissoring to stretch and fill her. They both breathed harder, their pants echoing around them.

On a desperate whimper and breathless cry, she screamed out, “Fuck me, Lucas! Fuck me now!”

With her words, the animal she suspected inside him broke free. He reached down and, in one smooth jerk, ripped her shirt and bra open to bare her breasts and belly to his gaze, then pinched one of her dark, hard nipples. She shrieked, excited by his actions, and her pussy clamped down harder on his fingers. Common sense fled and she found herself on the verge of a pleasure precipice, and she was afraid he knew it. As he alternately pulled and suckled her nipples, she began fumbling with his pants in an effort to get his cock free. After a tense, struggling moment, his swollen erection sprang out. She grasped it, marveling at its size and the different sensation of baby soft skin covering hard steel. As long and thick as he was, she understood why he was readying her with his fingers. So he

would fit without hurting her. The red color of his shaft contrasted against his lightly furred, tanned abs. A bead of precum formed at the tip of the purpled head and she longed to take him in her mouth and sample his male taste.

At her touch, Lucas seemed to lose all of his control. Low, loud growls emerged from his throat. He pushed her back against a tree, pushing her skirt farther out of the way, lifting her legs around his waist, and plunged his cock deep into her pussy with one urgent stroke.

Oh, God.

Lucas covered her mouth with his own, muffling her screams and moans, not moving as her body adjusted to his size. After a moment of stillness, she wrenched her mouth free, gasping for air.

“What are you waiting for?” she cried.

“You’re tighter than I expected, and I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Fuck that.” She’d crawl out of her skin if he didn’t move. “I need it hard and fast...hurry.”

That was all the encouragement he needed to move. He struggled to pull his entire length back out but her body was too eager and his cock so thick. The pleasure ripples alone were almost more than she could bear. Already the tease of release tugged at her womb, sizzled across her clit.

“Dammit. So fucking tight. You’re going to make me come too fast.”

She wiggled against him wildly when everything exploded, little splinters of light and sensation rushing through her, leaving her breathless. Her nails clawed at his back, sinking deep into his flesh. Ecstasy burned straight through her, filling her, mending pieces of her soul she hadn’t even realized were broken. Until a tiny piece of her wanted to admit that she did indeed need her mate. A fact she didn’t know how to handle.

She rode out the orgasm, wrenching every last drop of pleasure. His body tensed, rigid and stiff underneath her arms and legs where she was wrapped around him seconds before he bellowed out his own release. Exhausted and satisfied, she slumped forward against his chest and listened as his wild heartbeat began to slow and finally beat regular again.

What am I going to do? He's my mate.

If she hadn't been sure before, the tingling and tightening of her birthmark from was a dead give away. Until now she'd ignored the sacred mating mark she'd been born with, unwilling to believe she had no control over her fate. God, she didn't have time to deal with this in her life right now, let alone how he must feel, but without him she'd die. As far as he was concerned, she was just the enemy he was sexually attracted to. Surely he wasn't thinking beyond a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am. Yet, he'd taken her with a force and need far more complex than a simple "once is all I need." What would he think when he found out who and what she was to him?

She pushed away her desperate fears and straightened her spine, remembering who she was and her own abilities. Not only could she handle this, but much more if she had to.

Lucas withdrew from her and lowered her to her feet, taking an awkward step away from her. "Uhm, it looks like I ruined your clothes." He avoided her eyes as he spoke, and she'd bet her last dollar he wanted nothing more than to get away from her. She couldn't blame him. Being alone right now would be a helluva a lot better than this awkward feeling.

She had to fight the urge to jump when he turned his fiery gold gaze her way. His change in eye color unnerved her. His pupils had dilated enlarging the golden centers and leaving very little of the dominant green hue she'd seen before. Add to that the fact he didn't look too worried, in fact he looked smug.

"It's okay. My skirt is fine, and I'll just tie my shirt together until we get to the car. I have plenty of clothes in the trunk to change into." She did her best to stand there, head held high, as if it was all no big deal, when inside her stomach churned.

He watched her as she gathered herself together. She didn't know whether he wanted to run or go again and the uncertainty left her uneasy. She curled her trembling fingers into the fabric of her shirt, determined to hide her weakness from him.

"Lucas, can we go back now, so I can get cleaned up?" Exhaustion began to set in as she pressed a hand over her eyes.

"Yeah, let's see about finding a motel for the night, so we both can shower and get some sleep."

* * * *

Kira savored the steamy water rolling over her body. She winced when the heat stung some of the scratches from the tree. The momentary ease had been worth each and every scratch and scrape. Even now she couldn't get the image of Lucas taking her so frantically and roughly out of her mind. She still felt his lips pressed against her burning skin, tasting and taking whatever he wanted. It had happened as if he *needed* her, much more than simple want. *Yeah right, wishful thinking again. I could never ask him to sacrifice himself to mate with me and save me from the madness.* How much longer would she be able to control it? Leaning forward, she pressed her forehead against the cool tiles and shut her eyes, reliving the incredible sexual episode they had shared in the woods...

* * * *

As Lucas pumped his cock into her, he taunted, "Is this what you wanted, whore? Planning to fuck me until I don't care what I tell you about my family?" His anger was clear as he slammed his cock into her again.

"No, you don't understand. I am like you, but different." She pleaded for his acceptance, though she knew from the anger in his eyes that he would never give it.

"You are a liar and a whore. Trading your body for information." He grunted as he fucked her faster. "I hate women like you." His words were harsh and rough. Her own protective instincts rushed forward, filling her body with rage. She pounded on his chest, trying to make him stop, but her body was pinned tight with no way to escape. He laughed at her, the tone so mocking she couldn't breathe....

* * * *

She fell to her knees in the shower as the water pounded against her back. *No. No. No! Not the truth. Not the truth. Not how it happened.* Her fist slammed into the tiled wall in frustration, splitting the skin of several knuckles. This had to

stop. As she stayed there, clutching her arms around her waist, her memories began to clear and she realized her condition had worsened. In that moment in the woods, Lucas had loved her like no other man could. And now her mind wanted to play tricks on her again.

No way would she succumb to the anger and hatred trying to take over. She could control it. She knew right from wrong and damn it, there had to be a way to fight the change. When the water ran cold, she struggled to stand and turned off the shower. *Enough. I will find a way out of this on my own.*

* * * *

Lucas heard the water shut off. Kira had been hiding in the bathroom since they'd arrived at a nearby motel. Probably for the best considering what had happened in the woods had shaken him to his very core. He didn't understand how things had gotten out of his control, but it was time to get it back.

Was this all part of her plan? For the first time since he'd grabbed her, Lucas began to think kidnapping Kira was a really bad idea. The sooner he got away from her the better. He hesitated. For some reason the thought of not being able to touch her again caused his stomach to cramp. *Yeah, definitely time to get rid of her.* And despite what happened, she couldn't be trusted. In the morning, he'd leave her and go home alone. She was a big girl and could find her own way back to wherever the hell she came from.

He rubbed his face between his hands, wearier than ever. He needed to get some rest in order to think straight. The thoughts and urges running through his head made it impossible to lay still. He stood up to pace instead. Instinct told him big changes were happening around him and he'd learned long ago to trust that kind of gut reaction. It was Kira. From the moment she'd walked into his dreams, everything had shifted and he'd become obsessed.

Even now the thought of her rubbing her lush body with a towel at this very moment was enough to make his mouth go dry and his mind and body fill with lust. Everything earlier had been rushed, now he wanted a chance to explore, to sample. Her pale

skin would be moist and succulent, flushed from the heat of the water. His cock stirred again. He was afraid for her to come out because he knew she would be irresistible. He stared at the bed and imagined her lying underneath him, begging for more. He would savor every minute of pleasure he could give her and she would reward him with those soft eyes and little cries of need.

He shook his head in disgust. *Get a fucking grip, man.* Hell, if he didn't pull himself together he'd find himself at her mercy or worse.

As the door opened and Kira stepped out of the bathroom, he froze in mid-step.

"What?" she asked.

The sight of her in the simple green tank top and running shorts was enough to make him lose it. Memories of that outfit from a dream sent cold chills racing up and down his spine. The material barely covered her ass, and her tanned legs went on forever. Fuck, he wanted her now even more than in the woods, if that was possible.

"Nothing. I was just going over what I need to do tomorrow." He walked to the window and took some deep, hopefully calming breaths, attempting to slow his racing heart. His hand pushed on his cock, desperate to find a comfortable spot for it in his pants. The beast pressed at his skin, tempting him. The animal inside wanted her as much as he did. Interesting.

"Are we going to Dragon Tail?"

He froze. *What the hell?* How could she know? The thought that his home and haven had been compromised caused searing pain deep in his chest. It was his duty to protect them at all costs and yet he had managed to lead them to the front fucking door. Fresh rage beat down the arousal.

"What do you know about that?" He turned and slowly stalked her, waiting for an answer.

Her eyes glinted as she spoke, "It's our home."

The mere thought of her exposing his family had the fur rippling across his skin. He wanted to change, needed to change. If he did, he wasn't sure he could prevent himself from hurting her. He would do anything to keep his secrets, even resort to violence. Especially violence.

“Wait, what did you say?” He couldn’t have heard her right. “Did you say our—” Lucas stopped mid-sentence when his nose tingled, his heightened senses picking up the scent of danger and a whole lot of firepower. *Gunpowder*. His head pivoted toward the window as a rumbling growl sounded deep within, an instinctive response to intruders.

He heard them talking and smelled their approach. “What have you done?” he gritted out. When she tried to say something, he roughly covered her mouth and jerked her against him. “Quiet, woman. I have to think.” He scented her anger and impatience radiating from her skin but, thankfully, she stayed quiet. He was going to have to use her again to get free and probably keep her for a while longer, despite his gut telling him what a mistake that would be.

After ravishing her in the woods, something he couldn’t explain had happened. He had softened toward her. Allowed a weakness to slip inside that could go very wrong for him and his kind. Now he just wanted to escape her lure, and all along she’d been using his lust to slow him down and plan his recapture. A fatal mistake on her part. After they escaped again, he would find a way to make her pay and enjoy every minute of it. He let the red rage of anger simmer closer to the surface, the beast within fighting for control. Obviously he’d taken the “keep your enemies close” a little too far with her.

* * * *

Kira took a deep breath and reached for the Tallan. She needed to see what they were up against outside. After a few relaxing breaths and a forced concentration on her part, her vision cleared, revealing the men out front who planned to attack them. “Lucas, there are only four men out there. If we leave right this second and head down the south stairwell, I think we can avoid them or at the very least get a short head start.”

When he didn’t respond, she glanced over her shoulder to see if he was still there. His eyes were gold, glowing slits, just like a cat’s. She’d seen those very eyes in a nightmare recently. He’d started to change outside the diner and she hadn’t even been surprised. Somehow she knew, and not just from her

dreams. Everything about him seemed natural to her.

Now his anger shimmered off of him, creating a sense of dread around them. His tight stance indicated a predator about to spring. Even without the Tallan she saw his struggle to hold back the beast. What would happen if he changed now? Would he hurt her? She reached up and stroked his cheek, keeping eye contact the entire time, praying he wouldn't bite her with those sharp canines of his.

After a few long, tension filled minutes, his eyes faded to a softer gold and green again, maybe regaining a semblance of control. At least she hoped. He stepped closer to her, hissing in her ear, "Be careful how you handle this, Akira. If you don't want anyone out there to die, then I suggest you do what I say."

Despite the wave of sheer terror rolling over her at the menacing tone of his voice, her own proclivity to violence increased, really pissing her off. She rolled her eyes at him. "I'm getting sick and tired of you treating me like an idiot. I came to help you and, damn it, that's what I'm going to do." He snorted, and she dared the smug son of a bitch to laugh at her.

"Babe, you have no idea what you've gotten yourself into. Unfortunately, we don't have time for a sit-down chat for me to explain. It's time to go."

Chapter Three

Without words, he grabbed her backpack and slung it on her back. She reached for her shoes and headed for the door, not bothering to look behind to see if he followed her. At the moment, she didn't care. His trust issues grated on her nerves and she needed out of this situation. The sooner the better.

As she started down the stairs she felt the now familiar push of him at her mind. "Kira, wait."

Giving him a small break, she answered without even looking back, "We don't have time to chat. They're moving in."

"Where are they now?"

She hesitated. "Right outside our room, preparing to throw a nerve gas can." As soon as she spoke, breaking glass sounded from the direction of their room, causing them both to take off in a dead run. In seconds the soldiers would ascertain they'd fled, giving them precious little time to get away.

"I think we can just make it to the car." She picked up speed, daring him to keep up. A few yards from the car, Kira came to an abrupt halt, causing him to crash into her back. She tumbled forward but Lucas snaked his arm around her waist and caught her before she hit the ground.

"What the hell are you stopping for?"

"Something isn't right. I can feel it, here, but I don't see it." She twisted in his arms, breaking his hold. "We're missing something important here. Almost feels like..." She began frantically looking around for a clue or a sign of what "it" was.

As Kira tried to find out what pulled at her, the pounding of boots scrambling down the stairs grew louder. Lucas jumped in the car and started up the engine to leave. "Get in the damn car now!"

"I can't. Something's really wrong here and I'm—I'm trapped."

“Yeah, I’m about to get captured again, something I’m completely against. Are you planning to watch the torture this time?” The waves of his anger pushed at her, trying to force her to do what he wanted. But something else already had her in its grip, keeping her riveted to the spot from an unseen source until she figured it out. She turned back to the motel, searching for signs or a clue, but all she found were four pissed off men emerging from the stairwell and running towards her. They carried some very angry looking weapons now aimed directly at her chest.

“Stop right there.”

She held up her hands in a gesture of surrender. When the first man stepped forward, a menacing growl sounded behind her. *Oh boy, Lucas is losing it.* When the man in front of her peered over her shoulder, the sight must have frightened him. He took several steps back, keeping his eyes on Lucas instead of her.

From the corner of her eye, she watched Lucas jump from the car, his body changing as he moved. Bones crunched and shifted, teeth elongated, clothes ripped. Claws on his hands and feet sprang free, and dark fur rippled along his skin. He grabbed her with his hands, which were all too quickly becoming paws, pushed her across the passenger’s seat, and roared at her, “Drive!”

Holy shit, drive the damn car, Kira.

Thanks to the adrenaline coursing through her along with years of military training, she gunned the screaming car out of the parking lot like a demon bat out of hell as the men behind them opened fire. Bullets bit into the metal of the car as she swerved back and forth and focused on escape. As Kira rounded out of sight of the motel, one last shot hit the back window, shattering the glass.

Keep going, Kira. Don’t hesitate. Lucas’ voice in her head was both urgent and strangely comforting as they cleared the area with no sign of a tail.

Seeing Lucas go through his change from a maybe six and a half foot, heavily muscled man to a sleek, powerful-looking cougar had been more than a little scary. She’d grown up hearing the stories about his clan, but neither she nor anyone she knew

had ever actually seen one. They were known as solitary, independent creatures who didn't like to associate with other clans and usually spent great periods of time away from their own families. Especially the males. After all these years she'd never quite believed until she witnessed it with her own eyes.

Minutes clicked by as she contemplated what to do next. He sat in the seat behind her but she was afraid to look. How would she feel looking into the eyes of her lover in the face of a big cat? She tried nudging his mind to hear his thoughts, but he was locked up tight. *Now what?*

Taking in a deep breath, she lifted her gaze and glanced in the rear view mirror to see nothing. She jerked around in momentary panic to find him lying across the back seat with his head resting on his paws and his eyes closed.

A soft gasp escaped her. He wasn't just a cougar, he was *the* cougar. The legendary black cougar she'd heard stories of, the one everyone said didn't exist, the one she'd encountered one day as a child...the one she'd spent years searching for. She'd eventually convinced herself it had been a dream.

It all made so much more sense now.

Well hell, she'd have to find a safe place for them to stop so they could finally have a talk. She needed some answers and it was way past time for him to know the truth, and damned if she didn't want to admire his new shape. Her curiosity was killing her.

Focusing on the road once again, she began plotting where to stop and what she'd say to him. He wasn't going to like the truth. If he even believed her.

Thinking about the narrow escape, she remembered the strange sensations she'd encountered as she'd approached the car. *And why aren't we being pursued?* Whoever they were had gone to great lengths to find them to just let them go. *I'm missing something critical here, I just know it.* Now she had to figure it out before it was too late.

* * * *

The car came to an unexpected stop, so Lucas sat up and looked around. He must have finally dozed off because it had

turned dark outside. No problem for him now because of his superior night vision when in cat form. Kira had parked them at the far side of a rest area but had pulled the car as close to the cover of woods as she could. A fat moon shone through the trees, enticing him.

He turned and gazed at Kira. She just sat there with her head on the steering wheel, not moving. Was she scared of him? He didn't smell fear. It was more like—he lifted his head and sniffed—anxiety or anticipation. He couldn't be sure. He debated shifting back to human form but it had been too long since he'd done this and he wanted—no, needed—to get out and run and be alone for at least a short while. He pushed his upper body between the two front seats and nudged his nose against her hand and purred to get her attention. She jumped at his touch, turning to finally face him. For one quick moment he spotted an unexpected emotion—sadness—in her eyes before she went blank.

“Do you need help getting out or something?”

Her voice carried a rich and husky tone, the kind of sound that skittered right down his spine, causing a strong shudder. *Yes, I need to be alone for a while.* He gentled his own tone in her mind, trying to gauge her openness to him. *Can I trust you to be here when I get back?*

Exhaling what he guessed to be a heaping sigh of frustration, she simply said, “Yes.”

Kira leaned across the seat and opened the door and turned back to stare out the windshield. Whatever thoughts ran through her mind, she likely needed some time to deal as much as he did. He bounded out the open door and into the woods faster than the normal human eye would notice. If he'd caught the attention of anyone, all they'd recall was a black blur they couldn't identify.

After hours of running, hunting and thinking, he couldn't find a way to stop his body from craving her. Or the burn of need driving him mad. He had left her alone in the car because the animal needed freedom. But what he'd really needed was to get away from her to clear his system, exhaust his body with a run, and get his mind to a more lucid state that didn't include thoughts of her tight sex squeezing his cock every few minutes. Finally giving up, he returned to the car, shifting back to human

form on his way.

He found her curled on her side across the front seat, fast asleep. Her red tresses seemed to glow in the moonlight and he couldn't resist reaching down to stroke her cheek to see if the skin was as delicate as it looked. He had so many questions that had to be answered but, for now, he just wanted to taste the curve of her neck below her jaw. He moved in next to her, inhaling her spicy scent, licking her curves as he went. She stirred and mumbled his name in her sleep but didn't awaken. He liked the roll of his name from her tongue. *Mmm*. Stroking her back in a light massage, he lifted her hair away from her neck to continue his tasting adventure, revealing a small cougar-shaped birthmark at the base of her head.

Startled, he yanked his fingers away. "What the fuck is that?" When her body jerked awake at his booming voice, he caught sight of the Glock curled in her hand he'd failed to notice before. Not giving her time to react, he continued, "You have the mark of the cougar on your neck. Who the hell are you?" His heart thumped in his chest, a tell tale sign he was going into a full-blown rage as the implications of her birthmark began to sink in.

Rolling over to face his anger directly, she rested the gun on the seat beside her and spoke plainly. "I am Akira MacDonald of Clan MacDonald of Dragon Tail. I've been trying to tell you for two days who I am, but you either refuse to listen or the time wasn't right to keep pushing."

His eyes narrowed and brow creased into a scowl as he processed her big revelation. What seemed impossible was proven true by the mark she carried, which only complicated the situation. His back stiffened. "If you're part of a Dragon Tail clan, then you've committed the ultimate betrayal of your kind. Your actions are punishable by death in any of the clans and a hunter will be dispatched to take care of you. One of my hunters, in fact." He slammed his fist into the dash, relishing the pain. "Why the hell would you betray us like that? You have to be one cold fucking bitch."

"Whoa, what the hell are you talking about?" she demanded. "I haven't committed any crimes."

"The fact you're working with a group responsible for

kidnapping me and have been trying for days to make me shift on command makes you guilty of the ultimate clan betrayal. I don't even have to give you a trial." He shook his head as he pushed through the car door away from her and paced across the parking lot. "Not to mention a Guardian. Don't you realize how serious this is? No one takes a Death Enforcer and gets away with it. No one." He needed to get away from her. This was even worse than he'd originally imagined. He or one of his brothers would be responsible for taking her life. Deserving or not, he didn't know how he could handle that. Rage and heat consumed him and every instinctive bone in his body screamed to protect her, take her...claim her.

* * * *

As he walked away, Kira opted to let him go for now. His posture was rigid, awkward even, as if he was uncomfortable in his own skin. She'd seen the same kind of look in her own clan members when they'd made their decision with no thought to right or wrong, consequences be damned. This shit had to stop. They were not God.

She stepped from the car, grabbing the keys but leaving the gun to rest on the seat underneath her purse. Her point would be lost if she accidentally shot the bastard, deserving or not.

"Hey, Lucas." She called out to him, stopping him in his tracks. "I don't think so. You don't get to rage at me and make all kinds of wild accusations and then just walk away. Who the hell do you think *you* are?" She was steaming mad and a freight train couldn't stop her now.

"You invaded my dreams days ago—my dreams, God damn it—and I thought you were just a figment of my imagination. But the dreams didn't stop, and when I dreamt *you* were in danger I decided to investigate and found *you* in a godforsaken cell. A cell, I might add, I let *you* escape from."

He turned back to face her and she got right up into his personal space, leaving no question how angry she really was. His vivid green and gold eyes were completely unreadable, and he said nothing. Somehow void of emotion.

"I don't even have a clue as to who did that to you or why

you were captured. I only know of your clan and, by association, I felt obligated to help you.” She paused again, waiting for him to say something, and still she got nothing. “To hell with this and to hell with you. I don’t need this and I certainly don’t need you.” Stalking away, she knew that wasn’t true but she had no intention of telling him now. He knew the truth about her and there was no way he wanted her now. She had half a mind to leave him here stranded and half naked on the side of a rest area. If he wanted to get home so bad, he could just hitch a ride.

* * * *

Lucas paced. He reeled with the implications of her revelation. As Guardian of his clan, it was his duty to know and understand all of the Dragon Tail clans. Clan MacDonald was a tight knit community of psychics with a wide range of psi abilities. None were shapeshifters. But a powerful race indeed. Dreamwalking was a very common MacDonald trait, so it didn’t surprise him she’d be in his dreams and even visioning more with the Tallan.

He stopped short, realization suddenly dawning on him as he remembered the specific session of his study covering their dreamwalking abilities. In psi clans, sexual dreamwalking only occurred at the onset of mating and only possible with their true mate. It was nature’s way for them to find each other.

Oh, shit. No. No. No. There had to be a mistake. It couldn’t be true. He struggled for another answer. Not only was it impossible, it was against their laws. The uneasy treaty between all the clans clearly stated there would be no interclan breeding. But deep down, he knew. *Fate doesn’t make mistakes, but she sure likes to fuck with you.*

I am her mate.

Looking around, he realized he’d walked in a circle and was nearly back at the car. Kira stood propped against the hood—tanned, long, smooth legs on display from hip to ankles, contrasting sharply with the baby blue color of her car. With the certain knowledge of being her mate, he took in her appearance in a whole new light, as if he’d never seen her before. Suddenly starved, all he wanted for dinner was her. Her arms were crossed

in front of her body, indicating her displeasure, but little did she know crossing her arms like that caused her breasts to swell at the edge of her tank top. She must have been cold, too, as her nipples strained against the thin green fabric. Oh, how he wanted to touch them, roll them between his fingertips and lick them with his rough tongue. His gaze moved up to her face and realized while he'd been fantasizing about her nipples, she'd been glaring at him from beneath those inky lashes. Her eyes narrowed in disapproval.

"Lucas, take me home." Though she spoke in a near whisper, her voice sounded tense and angry, her eyes filled with sadness.

"Kira, you know, don't you? You know that I'm your mate." Saying it out loud caused his chest to constrict and he struggled to take in enough air. He hadn't intended on claiming a mate for a very long time, if ever. He liked to play and control way too much.

"I don't care. We don't even like each other. We can't get along for five minutes unless we are having sex. Forget about it. Take me home and let me forget about it."

Unbelievable. Arrogant little wench thinks she can just blow me off? "Oh, we are definitely going to the Dragon, but you are going home with me. We will have to come to some sort of agreement regarding our situation."

"Yeah, here's your agreement." She raised her hand and flipped him the bird. "Fuck off! I don't want you, you don't want me. It's a no-brainer."

God, her mouth really pissed him off. She sounded almost irrational now. In fact, in his mind, she was working her way to a punishment. And his brand of punishment she was not likely to forget.

"Get in the car. We're leaving."

* * * *

Hours later, Kira found herself drifting towards sleep she didn't want. She'd reluctantly allowed Lucas to drive her car as they headed back to the Dragon. They hadn't spoken since they'd gotten back on the highway, and the road passing in front

of them was pulling her into sleep. The place she feared the most right now. One of two things would happen, and neither appealed to her at the moment. Dreamwalking with Lucas, although unlikely since he was wide awake behind the wheel, or some alternate version of reality that accompanied her degenerative mating period. The curse of the female psychic. The stronger your own power, the worse it seemed to affect you at this time. She doubted Lucas knew, since it was the one secret or weakness her clan did not want revealed.

So she fought sleep, despite the exhaustion setting in. Maybe a little catnap would work. She laughed at her own pun, glancing furtively to the side to see if Lucas watched her. His profile looked set in stone. He stared out the front windshield, unmoving, his mouth set in a grim line. She wanted inside his head but he'd firmly locked her out. Whatever he was thinking would remain private for now. She let her eyes slide shut. Even he had to sleep sometime...

What does Lucas want from me? He's forcing me to his home. For what? He must think if we mate he'll be able to control me. Will he take advantage of me again? I need to come up with a plan before we get there. If his clan catches me there, they will claim me and I'll never be allowed to return home. God forbid if he has any brothers or close pride mates, I'll become a sex slave to them all. Good thing I'm a trained soldier. They may be stronger thanks to their supernatural cat powers, but they still have no idea who they're dealing with. No man is going to claim me and have me slave to his every need. My mother put up with that for so many years. That will never be me. Didn't she realize I was there when he took her over and over again until she nearly died from it? Why didn't she try to take us away? A deep feline snarl sounded from somewhere behind her. I have to run, I have to hide. Now...

The car stopped and Kira snapped awake. Her thoughts were cloudy and she couldn't seem to focus. Only one thought lingered. *Must get away, find a place to hide. Don't go with him anymore.*

Lucas opened her door and she stepped out of the car onto the soft, muddy ground. The dirt was red, reminding her of the red clay of North Carolina. *Home.* Looking up, she noticed

they'd parked in front of a small cabin nestled in the trees at the base of a mountain. The color and texture of the structure blended with the terrain, creating a natural camouflage, probably preventing anyone from spotting it at a distance. A good spot to hide.

"Where are we?" Just then she noticed a tall, handsome man approaching them, and she nervously looked at Lucas. Sweat broke out on her forehead as she took a couple of steps backwards, sinking into the mud.

"This is my home."

The other man moved closer, a grin splitting across his handsome face. That kind of good looks probably got him whatever he wanted and left a string of broken hearts behind. When he came within reach, Lucas pulled the man to him for a friendly hug.

"Lucas, it's about damn time you got back here." The stranger turned to her and drank her in like a fine wine. Slowly and carefully. "And who is this you've brought with you? A present for me?"

"Hardly, asshole. Kane, this is Akira. Akira, this is Kane, my youngest brother.

"Half brother actually, which explains why I am so much better looking than Lucas here." Kane's response and smile were lost on her as an illogical fear gripped her, squeezing in on her like an inescapable vise.

* * * *

At the word *brother*, Kira's heart rate had sped up and her face clouded in distress. She jerked her hand away from him, turned, and without uttering a single word, ran into the woods.

"Kira, what are you doing? What's wrong?" She didn't answer and he looked at Kane with an incredulous face and just shrugged.

Kane laughed. "Having trouble keeping your women nowadays, big brother? You must be turning into a really scary guy if they take off running through the woods."

"Shut up and take this inside. I'll be back in a minute." He handed Kira's duffle bag to his brother and took off in the

direction she had run. As he left the drive, he heard Kane's mocking laugh behind him.

Has was so going to paddle her ass for this.

Kira. He spoke, pushing into her mind. Her panic and fear pushed back at him. *Why are you running away?*

I—I can't let you claim me. I won't be like her. Ever.

Her response confused him, but it was her panic that crawled along his skin, scaring the hell out of him. *Babe, what are you talking about? Her? What her?*

She didn't answer. In fact, it was as if she'd disappeared or, worse, didn't exist. He reached for her with everything he had and got nothing. Fear clutched his heart and his beast roared forward, demanding control. He dropped down on all fours and in a blink of any eye, he'd shifted. He'd catch up with her quicker this way, not to mention his senses were sharper for tracking. He sprang onto the overhanging cliff and started to search.

Lucas suspected something was terribly wrong. So far he couldn't identify the danger but he trusted his instincts to know when something wasn't right. Continuing to push his mind, he searched for her, trying to make a connection. He'd lost her scent a while back which made no sense at all. She'd only had a minute or so head start, how could she have just vanished, scent and all?

The forest was deathly still, giving him every sign of something bad going on. He crossed through the shallow stream, looking for disturbed vegetation along the bank or broken debris, anything that would give him a trail. At the deepest part of the stream, the frigid water lapped at his furred belly as he picked up speed, determined to find her. When his paws cleared the water and landed on the rocky embankment, he found her, or at least her trail. After several minutes, he reached out for help.

Kane, something terrible has happened.

What? What do you mean?

I'm not sure, but I sense Akira is in grave danger. I have her scent and I'm headed for the river right now.

I'm on my way, brother.

Lucas continued to follow the scent. He had picked up an additional familiar female stench and now he really worried.

That bitch from the lab had his mate. Whoa, where had that come from? He had to quit thinking of her as mate. Yet, considering everything that had happened over the last two days, he realized he wanted more from her. How much, he wasn't sure, but he wasn't ready to let her go...yet.

If that bitch Lara hurts Kira, I will kill her. Then the real hunt would begin because he already knew someone else was pulling her strings, and he had a pretty good idea who was responsible. In time, they would all get what they deserved.

She's in my woods now, and it's payback time.

That thought caused him to snarl in anticipated pleasure. He put his muzzle to the ground and picked up speed. They were close. *Akira, hold on. I'm coming, baby.*

* * * *

Kira slowly opened her eyes. Nauseous, she lay still, trying to clear her fuzzy thoughts and settle her stomach enough to move. She pulled at the edges of her memory for an explanation. She'd run from Lucas in sheer terror. Her only thought to get as far away as possible. Against a cougar on home turf, she didn't have much of a chance. He'd follow and find her.

Something had stopped her. A tree...no, not a tree. She'd run into a person, a woman. Kira focused harder on the memory and grabbed aimlessly at her neck. She'd felt the stinging pain of a needle being plunged into her neck. She'd been drugged by the...her vision cleared...*the bitch from the base.*

When she attempted to move her arms and legs she couldn't go more than a few inches. She lifted her head and found herself sprawled out on a flat rock with her wrists and ankles bound. Before she could think any further about her situation, a sudden heave in her stomach forced her to roll her head over to the side and throw up. Her gut cramped as the pain from the drug she'd been hit with rolled through her system.

"What's the matter, honey? You got a weak stomach?" Her voice was so heavy with sarcasm Kira wanted to smack her. She turned her head farther to the side and caught a glimpse of camouflage-clad legs walking around her. Kira couldn't speak with her mouth so dry and parched. The woman knelt down to

her level to look her in the eye. “Not to worry your pretty little head, this will all be over soon. When Lucas finds us, I’ll recapture what belongs to me and you’ll no longer be needed. Although, I bet you would be a lot of fun to play with.”

Contemplating the implications of the woman’s words, Kira quickly began calculating her options. After all, this was what she was trained for. She subtly glanced around the small clearing searching for reinforcements. She saw none. Lying on a rock across the clearing from her was some sort of metal ring and what looked like an electric baton. Probably a stunner of some sort. *Who is this woman who thinks all she needs are a few weak weapons to capture a man like Lucas? What a fool.*

She struggled to sit up. Not an easy feat when trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey. Focused now, she could easily function through the pain, but she knew the smart move would be to fake incapacity. That would lull her captor into a false sense of complete control, and buy her more time to plan and eventually get away. Rash actions were not Kira’s way. For optimal success, if given the opportunity, she always devised a plan.

“What do you want with Lucas?” she meekly asked the guard.

“Ah, would you really like to know?” She smiled at Kira with a sick twist to her face and a strange gleam in her eyes. “How much do you care for him? Enough to save his life?”

Kira considered her question. She did care for him. To what extent, she wasn’t sure. He was her mate and, like him or not, love him or not, she didn’t want to see him captured again.

“Care for him? Are you crazy? I barely know him.”

The woman’s dark head snapped up and she studied Kira’s eyes, as though searching for something. “I smell lies. He broke Clan rules for you, didn’t he? He shifted to save your life. Obviously he wants to protect you. So trying to hide your feelings at this point isn’t very clever. I guess I expected too much from you. No challenge here whatsoever.”

Rage swelled inside her, twisting deep in her gut. “Touch him and I will kill you.”

“Ahh, now that’s more like it. Worthless, but exactly what I expected.” The woman snarled as she stomped to the other side

of the clearing. Kira needed to tread carefully to avoid provoking this crazy woman any further. Her hands were still bound and she had yet to come up with the plan for freeing herself.

What was taking Lucas so long? Had he come after her? What must he have thought when she took off running at the word *brother*? Her episodes were getting longer and more frequent, making it difficult to convince herself she was exaggerating or even just plain making up scenarios in her head to frighten herself. She pondered how much longer she had before her mind succumbed to the darkness. Weeks? Days?

Kira...Kira, can you hear me? Lucas' voice sounded weak in her mind, but she heard him, knew he couldn't be far. The drug had probably been the cause of their link being broken and now that it was wearing off, he was able to get through.

Lucas, stop and go back! It's a trap!

I know. Kane and I are approaching, but I think she is more than she appears, and it may take us more time to get to you.

I don't know what her actual plan is, but it appears she's waiting, expecting you to get here soon. As she responded to Lucas she turned her head and met Lara's wary stare. She looked intense, suspicious, as if she knew something was going on. It sent chills up Kira's spine and she looked quickly away. She was getting that odd feeling again, like outside the motel. Sensing something not right. As if she was missing something important right in front of her. She reached out, searching for a connection to the problem but was unable to pinpoint it.

She heard a woman chuckling and turned quickly to look back at her. She met the woman's gaze, rage against hatred sizzling between them. Still she heard the chuckling.

* * * *

Kira struggled again to sit up, considering she was still bound and partially naked. "Excuse me, but I need to go to the bathroom." Kira watched the woman turn away from the weapons and simply stare at her. She wasn't looking at Kira's face so much as ogling Kira's nipples poking through her torn shirt. Her tongue darted out and she slowly licked her lips. *Uh oh, Lucas, you better hurry up. I don't like the look she's giving*

my naked body. She's creeping me the hell out.

You're naked? She'd have laughed at his shocked tone if she wasn't being stalked by a loon.

Sort of. They didn't have time to worry about the details of her clothing.

I'm coming baby, I'm coming.

Kira watched her captor move as fear threatened to engulf her. The woman picked up one of her weapons and walked over to Kira. "Don't think you can play games with me." She grasped Kira by the hair, pulling her close, clamping some sort of heavy duty vise around her left nipple and then repeating on the right. Kira screamed loudly, tears springing to her eyes at the excruciating pain.

Leaning down, the woman wrapped one hand around her neck, choking off her air supply. Kira couldn't speak. She couldn't think. She didn't have much time.

"Where is he? I know he's close. Tell him to back off, or you die here and now," she snarled viciously at Kira.

Kira tried to struggle but the pain was too intense. The woman slammed Kira's head against the rock, and her vision began to blur. This couldn't be the end. She refused to go out this way.

"While you helped my cause immensely, I didn't plan to kill you." She bent closer. "Vengeance is mine."

Fuck you, she mouthed.

Without warning, two big cats leapt from the trees above. The larger, midnight black one leaped on the woman's back and its jaws clamped down on her neck. The woman's eyes bulged in shock and silently pleaded with her. Kira felt the weight of both the woman and the cat pressing down on her and heard the woman's neck bones crushing next to her ear. Without releasing its grip of the woman's neck, the cougar pulled her off of Kira and threw her across the clearing in the direction of the other cat.

Kira gulped for breath as the cougar shifted back to his human form and she found herself lost in the blazing green and gold eyes of her mate. "Quick," she croaked out, "get the clamps off me."

Lucas deftly grabbed the devices and released her. She cried out. The sudden flow of blood rushing to the tips burned worse

than the pain of the clamp. Tears streamed down her face as she endured.

"It's okay, baby." He massaged her nipples with a soft, experienced touch. "It's normal to hurt like that when they're first released. It will only last a few minutes. I promise."

"Do I even want to know how you know that?"

"We'll have plenty of time for me to explain." He untied her hands and feet and threw the ropes into the woods. Their gazes locked on each other, neither able to speak and Kira knew she couldn't possibly tell Lucas what she felt. Not now.

Kira sprang into his arms, where she could find the comfort and heat she so desperately needed. She threw her arms around his neck and wrapped her legs around his torso. From the waist up, the contact between them was skin-to-skin, heat to heat, and the rest of his male naked flesh pressed against the thin silk barrier of her panties.

She banished the memory of her shorts being sliced from her body and the ripped and torn tank she still wore on her shoulders. Instead she focused on the wave of need and lust coming from Lucas and the haunted look in his eyes. They needed each other, needed to cling to the powerful emotions of burning heat driven by fate.

Adrenalin coursed through her, pushing everything else away, leaving her raw and open. Hot flames of desire licked at her skin when Lucas wrapped his hand around the back of her neck and slanted his mouth over hers, licking and nibbling at her lips.

The taste and heat of his kiss flooded her and brief thoughts of her mating call flared up again. She wanted him, her body so hot and wet she might combust, but the thought of him becoming her mate without love scared her to death. She liked him. Despite the stubbornness he displayed at every turn, she sensed his intentions were honest and true. Yes, she was attracted to him, craved him even, but she didn't love him any more than he loved her.

When his tongue slid between her lips, she moaned at the delicious friction he created with the rough texture of his tongue. Her arms tightened around his neck as he devoured her mouth and pulled her tight against him, his rigid erection fitting

perfectly between the juncture of her thighs. She liked the possessive way he held her, rubbed against her, as if seeking more touch and more pleasure for them both.

"If we don't stop now, I will take you right here," he warned, his voice rough and dark, sending a direct pulse of pleasure straight to her clit. His free hand cupped her breast, tracing the skin to her sore nipple where he gently caressed the swollen nub, wiping away the lingering pain.

"I don't care."

He trailed kisses from her jaw to her neck and onward until his warm breath floated across the puckered flesh of her taut nipple. He moved against her hips, his cock rubbing the full length of her slit. Cream flooded her panties and, to help her, she wanted him here and now. She didn't want to wait. Nothing mattered beyond the need of having him inside her right now.

"I'm not sure I can be gentle this time." His breathing sounded labored as she imagined him fighting for control. "The animal in me wants to mount you, take you fast and hard. Mine, damn it."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not. I should have protected you."

"You saved me." She bit at his flat, pointed nipples then. Hard nips that had him unleashing a series of growls. A sexy, possessive sound rumbled through his chest. Her pussy clenched, more juices spilling onto her swollen folds.

His nostrils flared and she knew he could smell the extent of her arousal. She unwrapped her arms and legs from around him, nearly tumbling them to the ground. She hastily jerked her panties from her legs and relaxed back against the rock, lifting herself up to part her thighs just enough.

"Kiss me, Lucas, I need you." The sound he made should have worried her, but it didn't. This primal, animal nature of his touched something deep and dark inside her. A place that created liquid fire in her body at every thought of her mate. Something that couldn't be denied right now.

His hand snaked out and reached between her thighs, running his fingers through her kinky curls. His fingers swirled through the moisture and slipped inside.

"Yes!" she hissed through clenched teeth, drowning in the

pleasure of friction created around her clit and inside her passage. That simple jolt nearly threw her over the edge. Her climax was already building, and if he could hit just the right spot...

His head bent to her apex and he lapped at her. The breath left Kira's lungs and she couldn't utter a sound. His lips wrapped around her clit and sucked while he finger-fucked her pussy. She heard herself scream as the passion flooded through her and she hit the point of no return, tumbling her over the edge.

She pulsed around his fingers and writhed against his mouth, light and flame overtaking her senses. So wrapped up in the haze of her orgasm, she was surprised to find herself flipped onto her belly, Lucas' cock pressing against her ass. Rough hands gripped her hips tight as he worked his length inside in short, hard thrusts.

"Yes, please—please," she begged for more.

He sank balls deep inside her slick channel, pushing her against the rock and sending jolts of pleasure through her. She faced forward, searching for something to grab onto for leverage and came face to face with Kane who stood about twenty feet off to the side, watching. In her desperation and need for Lucas she'd forgotten that she'd seen two big cats.

He was naked as well, and stroked and pulled on his own engorged cock as Lucas pounded into her. His dark beauty entranced and fascinated her as she studied the way he stroked himself from base to tip with a tight fist. She had never watched a man masturbate before, and the sight of it struck her as darkly erotic and turned her on even more.

With every pulse and thrust of Lucas inside her, teasing her clit and sensitive walls, she came closer and closer to the edge again. It must have affected Kane as well as he had picked up the pace. Faster and faster Lucas took her, until his cock swelled inside her. She writhed beneath him, pushing against him, taking him deeper. The heat built impossibly high until she screamed out his name, her body exploding just as he jerked against her in his own release. Lucas shot his hot seed deep inside her at the same time Kane let loose with a wail and his orgasm shot from his cock to the forest floor.

As the waves of aftershocks began to fade, Kira collapsed

onto the rock. Too satisfied and too tired to feel bad about what had happened. When the three of them had come together, her body had burned for Lucas to complete the mating ritual. Instinct had demanded it. Now she didn't know what to think, and she kept her eyes closed, afraid to look at either man and see regret when she could still feel the darkest pleasure coursing through her veins.

Lucas slid from her body and gathered her in his arms. "Akira, come home with me. Let me take you to my bed, feel you safe in my arms. I need more time," Lucas whispered in her ear.

His voice sounded ragged and confused, just like she felt. She nodded against his chest, not ready to speak. Afraid to break the tenuous bond they had just formed. At her consent, he picked her up and began carrying her home.

Chapter Four

Lucas worried. So much so that he'd walked away from Kane, leaving him to deal with the mess. But killing Lara while on top of Kira had scared the shit out of him. She had looked so pale and frightened. Yet he'd taken her as if he had never been with another woman. Adrenaline and emotion had been high and the urge to mate with her had been a compelling force. Just as he'd been about to come he'd looked down at her neck, the mark calling out to him. His mouth had watered with the need to bite into her flesh in the one spot that would change their lives forever. Thank God for Kane and his voyeurism. Seeing him across the clearing with his fist around his dick had provided enough of a distraction to keep him from doing something both he and Kira would later regret.

She made him feel and he wasn't too sure if that was good or not. He had to maintain control at all times and not form unnecessary attachments. He had a tough job and sometimes it got ugly. That didn't make him a lot of friends. He turned to look at her sleeping form. Would he want to take her as a mate? It didn't matter. His clan would never allow it. Shapeshifters did not mix well and were forbidden to mate with other races. It was one of the many reasons they isolated themselves from other clans.

Kira stirred, mumbling something in her sleep he couldn't quite understand. He ran his fingers through her hair and spoke softly to her trying to comfort her as he would a child, but touching her like this caused his blood to heat. He definitely couldn't get enough of her. She'd tormented his dreams for so long and now here she was: all soft flesh and beautiful heat. He lowered his head down to hers and touched her lips with his own for a gentle kiss. They were silky soft and slightly swollen from their earlier encounter. *What would her lips feel like wrapped*

around my cock? That image caused a slight growl to escape his lips.

Would you like me to show you?

He started, not expecting her to have heard his thoughts. She giggled and her eyes popped open. "It's hard to get any rest around here when all you can think about is sex."

He rolled on top of her, pinning her in place. "You little minx. Don't you know it's not polite to listen to others' private thoughts?" he growled. His cock swelled against her leg as she squirmed around, trying to get out from under him.

"Is that a no?" she asked. Before he could answer she got a leg out and around him, flipping him onto his back. She straddled his hips, raking his naked torso inch by inch with her inquisitive gaze. From a distance his chest appeared hairless, but in reality there was a soft, light fuzz that covered every delicious inch of him.

"It's so soft. I've never felt anything like it." Bending to take one of his hardened nipples between her teeth, she smoothed her hands over his muscled abs. Her hot mouth exploring his skin drove him insane. He needed to be inside her. Wanted to feel his cock stretching her, filling her. Desperate to touch her, he traced his fingers along the sensitive skin of her side, admiring the dip of her waist and outward curve of her hips. He rested his hands on her waist, reaching his fingers around her body. Their bodies fit, like they were made for each other. Amazing.

She bit at his nipples, back and forth between the two, sending shivers of sexual tension straight to his aching cock. When her lips began a trail down to his belly, his hands bit into her waist as he fought the urge to take her with violence. She wanted this time and he would try to give it to her, even if it killed him.

She reached for his buckle and unfastened his pants. "I don't understand why you even bothered to dress." His cock sprang free, bouncing against his flat hard abs and she fisted it with both hands. He sucked in a sharp breath, silently pleading with her to let him fuck her mouth. Yeah, this kind of restraint was not in his nature.

She bent down and cautiously licked around the head of his

cock, the skin pulled tight and throbbing for release. A little precum beaded at the top and she greedily licked him clean. He tried thrusting his hips to get his dick in her mouth, but she held fast and wouldn't let him rush her.

"Be patient. You'll get your turn to be in control later." She eyed him wickedly as he arched his eyebrow in surprise.

"I don't give up control to anyone, Kira. It's not who I am."

"Then let me please you in my own way."

He paused, considering her request before assenting. "Only if you let me play, too." He saw the moment she realized what he was talking about. A sly smile curved her lips upwards.

"Deal."

Wiggling her body around so she could get to him from a different angle, she thrust her ass in the air, positioning her glistening pussy right in front of his face. On a moan she engulfed his cock all the way to the back of her throat. "Ooh, fuck! Yes." He grabbed her ass to keep himself from shooting off the bed as she began sucking him in and out of her mouth.

He needed a distraction to regain some control or this would all be over in a matter of minutes. He stroked two fingers along her slick folds before pushing them into her pussy. Her satiny walls caressed him as he curved upward searching for her inner sweet spot, the one that would make her quiver and beg and forget all about being in charge. When her lower body jerked against his face, he knew he'd found it. He stroked in and out of her in strong, slow movements, teasing and tormenting her sweet heat. Her muscles clenched around his fingers as he picked up the pace and fucked her harder.

She responded by grazing her teeth along his shaft, causing his body to jerk in fevered agony. He tilted his head up and ran his tongue along her entire slit, up one side and down the other, paying close attention to her swollen clit with every pass.

She moaned around his cock.

* * * *

Sucking in his cock as deep as she could take it, Kira kept a tight fist at the base. She felt his orgasm rising up as his shaft swelled even more with each pulse. Encouraged by his reactions,

she thrust her lips around him faster. His fingers and tongue were driving her wild and she couldn't hold back much longer. The direct pressure on her G-spot with every stroke was more than she could bear—her orgasm burst free around his fingers and her muscles convulsed, clutching him tightly.

At nearly the same time his cock pulsed in her mouth and flooded her with his stream of seed. She continued to suck and lick as fast as she could until she'd wrung him completely dry, and he slumped against the mattress. His fingers slipped from her dripping sex as her knees buckled and she fell limp across his strong thighs.

For a few blissful moments she basked in the feelings of euphoria he had caused. There was no denying he completed her and the urge to tell him, share the moment overwhelmed her. Her mouth opened and then snapped shut. What the hell was she thinking? How could she forget her problems? Like slamming into a brick wall—her body locked up.

"Kira, what's wrong, baby?" He sounded so worried.

She rolled off of him and grasped the sheet, covering her breasts. "Nothing." She couldn't tell him. Wouldn't take away his choice. In the long run he'd resent it and she would eventually pay for that. "I just want to get cleaned up." Tears welled in her eyes she desperately wanted to hide. Yanking the sheet around her body, she practically ran to the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

* * * *

Malcolm paced around his office. It had been twenty-four hours since he'd heard from Lara and it was unsettling to say the least. The idiot little witch probably screwed up again and didn't want to tell him. Looking down at his hands, he realized he'd been clenching his fists so tight he had broken the skin.

God, not having his powers drove him crazy. He wanted to reach for her telepathically and couldn't. He wanted to run wild and free through the woods in his cougar form, and couldn't. Miserable living like a mortal, he knew it was way past time to get back to normal again. The pain of a caged animal diminished his strength and the only control he still maintained was his hold

over the witch. No one else had noticed the change and still feared the wrath of a former Death Enforcer. His tenuous hold wouldn't last forever.

Lucas had the answers he sought but was so far not willing to give them up. He would rethink his strategy once he had his hands on his brother again. Dealing with his family's ignorance for all of these years had to come to an end.

Sure, he had dabbled in the dark arts with a few witches in his time, but he hadn't planned on risking exposure to mortals by doing so. Those witches had been such fun. They were the most sexually adventurous women he'd met. Unlike the uptight feline bitches of his clan. Remembering his last attempt at a little light bondage with a feline made the scars on his back itch. He had needed more. He'd ached to be in complete control of every aspect of his life, and for a while those three witches had fulfilled all of his desires. He should have known they couldn't be trusted in the long run. Just like Lara. Another dark witch, but like him, she'd been banished by her Coven and even the other dark witches feared her. In the past she'd been eager to serve him, but recently—in fact, ever since he had gotten her to capture Lucas—he sensed her evasiveness.

“Dammit, I have to find her and it looks like I'll have to do it myself.” But, first things first. Just thinking about how to punish Lara when he found her had his cock rock hard and desperate for release. He needed a clear head and a plan to go after them. Thinking over the possibilities, he called for Krissy to join him in his office. Reaching for the restraints and nipple clamps from his desk drawer, he decided that Krissy would have to endure Lara's punishment for now.

The door slid quietly open and the voluptuous Krissy sauntered in. She was dressed in combat gear, having just come from the training field. Her tank top molded to her large breasts, showing her peaked nipples. Her snug camouflage pants barely concealed what he knew to be long, lean legs. He imagined spreading those legs wide and tying them down to his bed one at a time. His cock stiffened more. When she was tied up and helpless her pussy would drip in anticipation. Maybe he'd tie her down on her stomach instead and drive his cock into her hot, tight ass. Yeah, that would be just the way to prove her

submission. Of course, not until she begged.

“Strip naked,” Malcolm demanded.

“But, Mal—”

He cut her off with a jerk of her arm. “I am your master and you will not speak to me unless spoken to, do you understand?” He waited for her answer while he watched her emotions flicker through her eyes. Sure, he made her angry, but he also recognized desire. She had been trying to get in his bed for quite some time but mistakenly thought she would do it on her own terms. The thought made him want to chuckle, but he held it in. She had to understand he would only accept her if she was willing to surrender completely.

“Yes, sir,” she whispered, putting down her weapons as she began removing her clothes. Oh yeah, her submission was going to be very, very sweet.

Chapter Five

Lucas padded quietly along the forest floor, searching. His paws were sensitive to every blade of grass, fallen leaf, or patch of mud, making him capable of discerning even the smallest change in the environment. He had been following an unusual scent for over an hour now and had to be getting close to finding the source.

When Kane told him Lara's body had gone missing, he had left Kira with him and set out to search. He'd returned to the scene of the crime and retraced her death. How could a dead body disappear within minutes of the fight and with two powerful hunters nearby? However it happened, he knew for certain that he had to find her before some stray hunter did and put out a call for help. The last thing they needed was the locals poking around their woods and asking questions.

He'd left his brother behind to take care of the woman not only because he needed someone to watch out for Kira, but also to give his brother some time to sort out what he'd seen. For the first time in he didn't know how long, he hadn't invited Kane to join in.

He wanted to explain, but how did you do that when you didn't even understand the change yourself? Everything about Kira seemed different from any woman he'd been with before. Right now emotions were running high and more than ever he needed to focus on his job.

Lucas let the early, cool mountain air ripple over his fur, regulating his body temperature as he continued his pursuit of the offensive scent. It didn't smell like the witch but it carried an evil stench in a similar manner that made his stomach turn in disgust. *Who was he following? And what had they decided to do about Lara?*

The memory of Lara's hands wrapped around Kira's neck,

choking her, burned in his blood again. Killing her so quickly hadn't been enough. She should have suffered like she'd made Kira suffer. As she had made him suffer.

His need to protect Kira had grown exponentially in the last twenty-four hours and, despite taking her several times, he wasn't satisfied yet. He wanted more, needed to have her again and again. He wanted to plunge his cock into her wet pussy, savor her unique sweet flavor, watch her lips wrap around his cock again... And he loved the way her eyes glowed with pleasure when she came.

What would it take to satisfy his hunger? Would it ever be enough?

He had to be careful. If the Council found out rival clan member was staying with him and that he was her mate, there could be serious consequences for him. Who was he kidding? They would find out. It was just a matter of time. You couldn't hide secrets in the Tail of the Dragon; they whispered on the wind. And when they found out, they would never accept an official mating between the clans. Demands would be made. Lines drawn.

To his surprise, Kira had not spoken to him about the mating ritual. Didn't she care enough about him to consider the possibility? She must realize it wasn't meant to be. His chest constricted at the thought of Kira leaving to return home. He had to stop moving to take some deep breaths and shake the heavy, ominous sensation. He struggled with thoughts of unexpected pain and discomfort as he absorbed the implications of her leaving as well as her staying.

Why does that make me uncomfortable? I don't need or want a companion. I like my solitude and could never be happy without it. Right?

* * * *

Kira looked around the room, contemplating what to do first. Restless since she'd heard Lucas leave, she searched for ideas.

Admiring his cabin, she walked into the kitchen. A small pine table sat in the corner with only one chair underneath it.

Everything was put away and the place was as neat as a pin, which totally freaked her out. How could someone be this neat? Even the military didn't expect this from her. The cabinets looked hand carved and the soft, earthy colors soothed and encouraged her to relax and take some time to explore. It was obvious that only one person lived here by the lack of duplicates. His dishes didn't come in sets, only a solitary towel hung in the bathroom and the living room only contained the bare essentials of furniture. She guessed Lucas didn't entertain much and instead spent a great deal of time alone. She could understand that. When you don't feel like you fit in, you choose to separate yourself from others rather than share a lot of awkward moments. Yeah, not like she knew anything about that.

Her relationships with men to date had never lasted more than one night. Of that she made sure. She loved having sex, lots of sex, and looked forward to every encounter. As long as it ended in the morning. Now, being drawn to her mate made it almost impossible to walk away; she burned for him every waking moment. She wanted his cock buried deep inside her over and over. Just thinking of him now caused her pussy to spasm, creaming in readiness. What would happen when one or both of them walked away? Well, she knew what would happen to her physically, but what about her heart? Was she in love with him? Could she ever trust him?

Not if he kept leaving her in the dark like this, expecting her to wait for him. She needed to be out, helping him find that bitch's dead body, but he'd snuck out without her. What a waste of time for him and Kane to try to hide their conversation from her by whispering outside. She had no problem walking through minds when she had a mission to accomplish or if she just plain didn't want to be left out. She'd heard all about the missing body and Kane's fruitless search. If Lucas trusted her, he would have seen she was perfectly capable of helping him accomplish any job.

She may have had a close call with Lara, but she'd been left with the need for some payback. Sure, Lucas eliminated Lara quickly, but in hindsight it would have been a better idea to attempt an interrogation to find out who else was involved before such drastic measures. Kira thought about the excruciating pain

she'd endured and imagined how much worse it might have gotten if Lucas hadn't arrived when he had. Chills raced across her body, raising gooseflesh on her arms. She had a bad feeling this was far from over. She needed to return to the latest crime scene and appropriate some intel. Ignoring her instincts would be a mistake.

Now that she had a plan, she reached out for Kane's location so she could slip past him. Lucas had asked him to stay and keep an eye on her. She shook her head and chuckled. "Men." They just had no idea. Realizing he was sitting in the rocker on the front porch, she slipped out the side door in the kitchen without a sound. He and Lucas were probably going to be pissed when they discovered her gone, but hey, that was their problem.

* * * *

Lucas continued to trail the scent for hours and still nothing. No body, no other people, nothing but a strange smell. He had looped back around and was now only a few kilometers from his home and Kira. He longed to be with her again. To touch her, make her squirm and scream in ecstasy. His pace quickened in anticipation. Would she be spread out on his bed, waiting? Or would she be curled up with a pillow, giving him a delectable view of her full, heart-shaped ass? His thoughts had frequently strayed to that luscious ass and he wondered if she would let him take her there. He imagined easing his dick into her tight rosebud, seating himself to his balls. He just knew her ass would grip his dick so tight he'd have to use every ounce of control not to come instantly.

Through the trees he caught sight of his cabin. He jumped onto the ground and sprinted toward the house, anxious to be with his woman. He might have to consider sending out a tracker to search for the missing witch, considering neither he nor Kane had found her. The council would also have to be notified of his return and briefed on the circumstances of his capture and escape. Once he reported in, hiding Kira would no longer be an option, but having a missing body somewhere in his woods would only endanger them all. His role required action no matter

the consequences. He shifted back to human form as his paws hit the front steps.

Kane sat outside, waiting for him to return. When he caught sight of Lucas he stood to greet him and stopped short. When he started howling with laughter, Lucas remembered that he was naked from the shift and fully aroused. His cock was jutting up against his belly, the head a deep plum color from the intensity of his arousal. He raised his head and locked gazes with his brother. Fuck it. It wasn't as if Kane hadn't seen him like this before.

"Hey, bro, you having a little problem?" Kane snickered while nodding his head down to Lucas' hard shaft.

"Yeah, one I'm about to rectify. So thanks for your help, but hit the road."

"Uhm...yeah...about that..."

* * * *

Kira traveled through the dense forest for hours, trying to locate the original scene, methodically searching the brush and scattered debris along the way as well as her mind for much needed clues. Finally stepping into the clearing, she let the surge of sudden anger that had remained on the scene wash over her. Humiliation burned her face as she remembered how easily Lara had gotten the best of her despite her training. Her psychic powers were declining too rapidly. It even affected her physical abilities. Time was definitely running out for her.

After a few more minutes of self indulgent venting, Kira moved over to the rock across the clearing from where she'd been sitting. She remembered seeing some sort of objects resting on the rocks that she thought had been weapons. Lara had turned her back on her and spent a good deal of time fiddling with the items that had rested on the rock. Where had they gone when Lara had been killed, she wondered? Had Kane picked them up and not mentioned it to Lucas? That didn't sound right. The first time Kane had touched her, she had sensed an almost child-like sense of honesty in him. Horn dog tendencies aside, he possessed a rare pure heart. She shook her head. No, something else was going on here and she hadn't picked up on it yet. Leaning

forward, she touched the smooth rock with both hands and reached for the Tallan, pulling the energy of the circle inward, giving her the boost she needed to see what others could not. Color and light blended, her vision blurred as she drew the power around her.

A piercing pain struck her in the head as she saw Lara standing in the spot Kira now occupied. Lara's essence invaded her body as she waited, causing nausea to roll through her. As Kira's stomach revolted, Lara began touching the items on the rock. Her words were mumbled preventing Kira from making out what she chanted. Kira's sight followed Lara's hands to get a closer look and saw three unusual objects: a simple bladed knife with an intricately carved handle, a small black bottle with a cork stopper, and a flat metal disk with a pentacle inscribed on it.

Tools of a witch.

Unable to decipher what the combination of these three objects would be used for, Kira attempted to reach further into Lara's mind. Not everyone with her gift could maneuver this deeply into another mind it scared them. It was her ability to do it easily and effectively that made her different from most of the other woman in her Clan and why they considered her even more dangerous during her mating call.

Again, the mind numbing pain in her head struck her, fighting for a stronger hold. Dark images floated across her eyes and she knew then she couldn't maintain the link. The darkness of Lara pulled her towards a painful abyss. She had to pull out fast before she hurt herself. Pushing away from the dark aura around her, Lara turned and grabbed Kira's arm in a tight vise, locking her inside. She was trapped. The mystery in Lara's glowing eyes beckoned her irresistibly and, when her lips curled into a satisfied smile, Kira's fear and anger knotted inside her. As the pain increased, she wavered, helpless to stop the invasion. Her last thought before succumbing to the darkness was of Lucas. *I should have at least left him a note to let him know where I was headed. Always have backup.*

When would she ever trust?

* * * *

Hearing Lara mocking her weakness, Kira opened her eyes. "Ah, are you finally going to wake up and play with me? I would have expected someone with your skills and abilities to be more fun, not so weak." Lara glared at Kira as she lay there helpless.

"I thought you were dead," Kira stuttered. She did feel weak and couldn't seem to get her bearings. She sat up and scanned the area around her for a sign of something familiar. Her eyes adjusted to the dark and damp gloom of the cave. Smoke swirled in the room, accompanied by a rancid odor she couldn't identify.

Turning back to Lara, she noticed her pupils were now black as coal and rimmed in red fire. Lara barely resembled a human woman. In fact she looked more like a creature.

"Dead?" She opened her mouth and roared. "Not hardly. The lot of you are fools to think you can handle me. My revenge has just begun."

"Revenge? For what? Where are we?" The last thing she remembered was getting into Lara's head, but somewhere along the line she'd lost control. Her head still pounded but the adrenalin from fear and anger pushed her forward.

Lara stormed across the cave floor. Her hand swung up, slapping Kira across the face, whipping her head back against a rock wall. The resounding crack reverberated across the cave, shocking Kira from her stupor. She sprang into a crouch and swept her right leg around her body, knocking Lara off her feet and flat on her back. Quickly rising up, Kira slammed her boot against Lara's neck, pinning her to the ground.

"Did you just bitch slap me? Are you kidding me? What exactly is your fucking problem?" Her anger swelled, as did her power. As Kira lifted her boot to kick Lara in the stomach, she dissolved into a mist. Kira sprang back into a fighting stance and swung around, searching the cave for Lara. Before Kira could spot her, Lara threw up her hands, throwing two flaming energy balls at her. Kira sprang to her left but not quite fast enough as one of the balls hit her in the thigh. The excruciating pain sizzled down her leg as she slammed into the wall. The smell of her burning flesh filled the cave along with the sound of Lara's deep chuckle. Images swirled together, a dark haired man standing behind a snarling Lara, the scent of blood and familiar voices

faded as Kira slipped into the oblivion of unconsciousness.
Damn it.

* * * *

Akira. Damn it, Kira, answer me.

She heard Lucas in her head, but when she tried to answer him, her brain wouldn't respond. She lay there for a few minutes more, letting her body adjust. Looking around, the swaying trees seemed too peaceful. She realized she was lying next to the same rock where Lara had stood fiddling with her Wiccan weapons.

What the hell had happened and, more importantly, what was that smell? It seemed so familiar. Sitting up, she searched the area for the source. Something on the ground caught her eye. Bending over, she picked up a small vial. There was no label on it so she unscrewed the top, raised it to her nose, and took a big sniff. "Ew, that stinks." Rubbing her nose to help rid herself of the foul stench, her vision blurred, sliding her consciousness into a different reality, and it finally dawned on her. "That smells like lavender mixed with something else." Like a fog clearing, she realized what was going on. "Holy shit! Black magic." Sweat broke out on her palms and her heart raced faster than it should. Her recent vision revealed that not only was Lara not dead, but she had something much bigger planned and she wasn't doing it alone.

Kira, where the fuck are you and why the hell aren't you answering me? Lucas was in her head again. This time she could have answered him if she wanted, but chose not to. The man in her vision...it had to be him and he was with Lara. "Oh my God! He's been lying to me all along." The pain of that realization nearly knocked her down. It all made perfect sense now. The two of them were working together, *He knows he's my mate and, with the help of a black magic witch, he could harvest my powers or at the very least gain control.*

Not gonna happen. Wondering what her next move should be, she gathered the herbs left on the ground and stuffed them into the empty vial. Slipping the glass bottle into her pants pocket, she turned, crashing into a hard male chest.

Looking up, her body tensed. "Kane, you scared the crap

out of me.” His face was set in an angry scowl, dark brows furrowed and his mouth in a grim line. She swallowed hard. “What?” She was standing so close to him she could smell him. He smelled like pine and forest.

“Why haven’t you been answering Lucas’ call?” She peered around his broad shoulders, expecting to see Lucas walk up behind him.

“I know the truth about Lucas.”

Kane continued to glare at her as if he could see straight through her. “What truth is that?” Crossing his arms in front of his chest, he waited for her to answer.

“Lucas didn’t kill Lara. They faked her death.”

“They? What they? Kira, are you feeling okay?” He gently grabbed her shoulders and brought her closer. “I was there, remember? I saw Lucas kill her.”

She shook her head, “You’re not listening.” Kane cupped the back of her head and drew her to his chest. His warmth tempted her. Just for a moment she thought of the strength she needed. “No, Lara is a black witch and she and Lucas are trying to take control of me and my powers.” Her worst fears were coming true right in front of her. “Kane, please listen. I had a vision and saw the truth. Lara wants to kill me but Lucas won’t let her because he wants the control instead. You have to help me.” Lifting her head, she peered into his deep blue eyes, looking for his truth. Would he help her or just turn her over to Lucas? Confusion clouded his eyes. Did he believe her?

Kira, I know you can hear me, I can feel it. Please, baby, tell me where you are? I just want to help you. Lucas again. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t block him. His voice grew stronger in her head the closer he got so she didn’t have much time. Kane had to help her or at least let her go.

How? How could she get him to cooperate?

Kane wrapped his arms around her and stroked up and down her back, comforting her. His touch sparked a new idea.

She pressed her lips to his, whispering against them. “Please help me.” He opened his mouth to speak and she thrust her tongue between his parted lips, thoroughly exploring his mouth in a hard and desperate kiss.

Shock rushed through her. Where she had expected him to

taste sweet and sunny, he instead tasted as spicy as he smelled earthy, an unexpected flavor of pleasure. Heat coursed through her blood, rational thought fled her mind and she completely forgot about her mission. She wanted more...more of his taste. Wanted to touch him skin to skin. To get closer she threaded her hands through his hair and wrapped one of her legs around him to give herself a sense of his body pressed against hers. It still wasn't enough as her body screamed for his hands running across her bare skin.

Letting go of his hair, she ripped open her shirt and pressed his work-roughened hands to her swollen and achy bare breasts. The rough texture against her smooth, heated skin was intense and her pussy flooded in anticipation.

Kane broke away from her lips, panting. "Kira, stop. What are you doing? We can't do this." His face wrinkled in concern, but his chest heaved and his hard cock pressed against her jean-clad clit.

Ignoring his feeble protest, she fumbled for the zipper on his pants. Quickly releasing his cock, she dropped onto her knees and took his entire length deeply into her mouth. Oh, God, the taste was divine. Dark and sinful. She stroked her tongue around his head and lapped at the bead of precum, groaning in pleasure.

Grasping her shoulders, Kane pushed her away and off of his dick. "No, this isn't right. You belong to Lucas. You are his mate."

At his last word, Kira's lucidity momentarily returned, long enough for her to realize what she'd done.

"Oh my God! What are we doing?" She scrambled off her knees, backing away from him. "What have you done to me? You're one of them. You want to control me, too." She grappled with the edges of her blouse, trying to cover herself. She stumbled backwards, desperate now not for sex but escape.

"Kira, wait."

Not even giving him a chance to say more, she turned and ran deeper into the woods. Her inability to understand what was happening around her frightened her more than her mind could take. She grasped her head in her hands, trying to control the throbbing. But it was the pain searing her heart she couldn't handle.

* * * *

Sensing Kira's distress, Lucas picked up speed. He'd been trying for hours to talk to her and she refused to answer. His frustration had long ago turned into anger and he couldn't wait to get his hands on her. It was time they had a serious talk. He was her mate, and she couldn't jerk him around like this. They needed to come to an understanding, no matter how temporary. He didn't know many details about how the mating call affected her kind, but the felines of his clan were restless and desperate to fuck until it was over. Kira seemed far more irrational and his instincts told him he was missing something.

Bursting into the clearing, he came to a sudden halt at what he saw. His brother standing there in the open with his pants down around his ankles and his wet, swollen cock jutting out.

Growling, Lucas warned Kane of his presence. "What the hell is going on here? Where is Kira? You said you'd found her." Lucas turned around, searching the area for Kira. Her scent was everywhere, including... Slowly turning back to Kane, he realized just what had been happening here. A murderous red haze flowed through his brain. His heart pumped faster as the anger spread throughout his entire body, leaving him edgy and ready to spring. He could kill Kane for this.

"No, brother, it's not what you think." Lucas stalked closer as Kane grabbed his jeans and fastened them back into place. "Something is wrong with Kira. She thinks Lara is alive and that you and her are planning to control Kira's powers."

"What?" His body stilled. "That's ridiculous. Where would she get a crazy idea like that?" He raised his eyebrows in question, pointedly looking at Kane. "And what the hell does that have to do with you standing here with your pants down and a stiff dick hanging out?"

Kane stood speechless as the precious seconds ticked by.

Of course he was. What could he possibly say that would explain his actions around Lucas' mate just moments ago? Hell, Lucas would never understand no matter what happened. One minute his brother had been helping him find a frightened and skittish Kira and the next...this. Even worse, for a split second

when he'd spotted him, Kane had bore the familiar look of pleasure Lucas had seen many times before when they'd shared women. He'd been fucking enjoying whatever she did. Lucas wondered if he'd even bothered to try and stop it.

With the undiluted rage rushing through his body, Lucas peeled his lips back in a snarl, revealing razor sharp fangs to his brother. Fucking with another shifter's mate under any circumstance could get a man killed. And rightly so. Even if he was family.

"Something is seriously wrong, Lucas. She wasn't acting like herself. I've never seen a woman so frantic in my whole life."

"And what about you, brother? Were you acting?" Lucas' voice vibrated with anger as he took another step closer.

"I'm sorry, she took me by surprise but I should have handled the situation better. I think she needs our help."

Taking a few steps closer, Lucas struck out, punching him straight in the face and sending Kane sprawling across the clearing.

"Stay the fuck away from my mate." Lucas turned back in the direction he'd come and stormed away. He couldn't look at his brother right now, not unless he wanted to live with the guilt of murder for the rest of his life. The beast in him clawed and fought against his will to do the right thing. He had to leave before he did something he would never be able to take back.

* * * *

Winded from running, Kira stopped to catch her breath. She glanced behind her and listened for any telltale sounds of someone following her but heard nothing over her own racing heartbeat. She couldn't afford to stop for long, Lucas or Kane were tracking her. What would they do if they caught her? Kill her? No, she expected Lucas to force her into completing the mating ritual. Just like she had envisioned, he and Lara would tie her down and take what they wanted.

She wouldn't let that happen. She'd make it to Deals Gap before Lucas, Lara, or Kane could catch her. Finding the sheriff would be easy. Getting him to understand her story—a whole

other ballgame. She had to try, otherwise Lucas would eventually capture her and she'd be helpless to stop them.

Her training kicked in. She knew these mountains like the back of her hand. She wasn't far from a small creek she could use to mask her tracks as well as her scent. Taking one last look behind her, she turned and took off for the water.

* * * *

Deals Gap. Often referred to as the inhospitable section of the southern Appalachians, it nestled at the mouth of the Dragon. Home for her kind. A small number of humans settled in the area, but for the most part, the Dragon was only occupied by the Clans of MacDonald, Gunn, and Comyn. All direct descendants from Scotland, forced to flee persecution and destined to hide their abilities here in the mountains.

One road led through the heart of the Dragon and, despite the danger, all walks of life had recently become enamored by the seductive curves of the Dragon.

Reaching the Tree of Shame, Kira sighed. She'd made it. Raking her gaze over the tree, she wondered when would the mortals learn to quit challenging the Dragon? Whenever one lost life or limb, a personal effect of theirs would be added to the tree. Seemed like every time she visited the gap, the stuff hanging there had multiplied.

Just past the small biker resort next to the tree, she spotted the sheriff's office. Making her way across the road, she attempted to brush away some of the debris on her clothes and straighten her hair. She needed a shower. Hopefully after she explained what was going on to the sheriff, he'd let her use his facilities to get cleaned up. She'd call her sister or maybe her mom to see about one of them coming to get her. She was going to need to hide for a while.

Pushing open the sheriff's door, she heard the basketball game playing on the radio. She rolled her eyes.

What is it about mountain men and their love of basketball?

Spotting the sheriff's boots propped on his desk, her gaze traveled up to his face. Sheriff Dave was a good ten years older than her, but sitting there in his chair lightly snoring, his arms

crossed over his chest and his hair hanging over his eyes, he looked ten years younger. Kira let go of the door and let it slam shut.

She smirked as Dave about jumped out of his skin at the bang. “What the hell is going on?” He squinted at her, taking in her appearance. “Uh, ma’am, what happened to you? Did you have some trouble out on the trails? Are you hurt? You’re a mess.” He sprang out of his chair and rushed around the desk. “Oh my God, Kira, is that you? Here have a seat.” He motioned to the couch that ran along the wall parallel to his desk. “Can I get you something? Some water?”

The events of the last few days came crashing down on Kira’s shoulders as she started trembling. Shaking violently, she tumbled down onto the offered couch. Looking at the sheriff, she watched his mouth moving with words she couldn’t hear or comprehend. He ran across the room, jerked open the closet door and retrieved a heavy wool blanket and quickly returned to her side. Placing the blanket around her body, she saw his lips moving again but still couldn’t hear what he said. Her temples pounded in tune with the roar in her ears. Her mind was on overload. She couldn’t remember why she’d come. She should be hiding from anyone who knew her. She opened her mouth to speak but only managed a grunt before passing out.

Chapter Six

Looking around the tiny cabin, Kira didn't recognize anything. She stood in a one-room dwelling with a small cot in the corner, a kitchenette along the back wall, and a dark brown recliner all alone in the middle of the room. Where was she? Why was she here? She strode across the small space and peered out the window to see if she could get her bearings. Instead of analyzing her surroundings, she came face to face with Lucas. His fierce expression upon seeing her in the window startled her. She took three steps back and drew in a gulp of breath.

The door slammed open and he sauntered in. As he stalked toward her, she stood her ground, despite wanting to turn and run. "What the hell are you doing here?" His angry heat blew across her skin as he glared at her waiting for an answer.

"You brought me here, you big brute, that's how it works." She took a step forward, getting right into his face, daring him to say more.

"How what works? You aren't making any damn sense, woman!"

She sighed. She was going to have to explain it all to him. She didn't have much time left and he was her last hope. "My mating call is controlled by you. Why do you think I fight you so much? Being controlled by a man is the last thing I can stand." She took a step back. Had to. His angry lust called to her and she didn't think she could control herself much longer. She loved him. Needed him to stay alive. Shoulders slumping, she turned away. When she awoke again it would be all over. Her conscious self had lost the battle and could no longer see reality.

"I don't give a shit about that. You betrayed me." He didn't yell, he simply spoke. His words ice cold. Remembering what had happened in the last twelve hours, she realized he was lost

to her.

"You have no idea how much worse this will get. Unless we complete the mating ritual, all is lost for me. I am sorry for what has happened—what will happen."

"Are you crazy? Mating ritual? How can you think of that now? After what you've done?" He turned from her leaving her alone in the cabin as a lone tear stole down her face.

"I am sorry, my love. I should have told you sooner but I just couldn't." she whispered the last into his mind but he ignored her and kept going.

* * * *

"Ms. MacDonald. Ms. MacDonald, wake up." Someone was shaking her awake. Opening her eyes, she found herself staring into the chocolate brown eyes of Sheriff Dave. "Finally, you're awake. I have been tryin' to get you to open those purty eyes of yours for fifteen minutes."

Oh thank God, she was still safe.

She quickly sat up. "Sheriff, I need your help. I'm being followed and it's not safe for me here. One woman has already been killed—well sort of, I think, and I'm supposed to be next."

"Whoa. Whoa. Slow down." He eased down next to her on the couch. "Someone's been killed, you say? You need to start at the beginning and tell me what happened."

She jumped up and paced. "You don't understand, Sheriff. I don't have much time. I've got to leave here quickly and hide." Her hands shook as she talked. "I watched him kill her with one bite, but now I don't think she's really dead."

"Bite? Are you talking about an animal attack?" He relaxed back against the cushions, clearly relieved.

"No, well yes, uhm—sort of."

"Honey, sit back down here, Did you hit your head? I think you might be hurt. You're not making any sense." He patted the couch, beckoning her.

"You don't understand. He's a shapeshifter. A man who turns into a mountain cat. He and his witch Lara want to control my powers. There's a whole clan of shifters living in the Dragon, but this one has gone rogue and wants to hurt me." She was

talking so fast trying to get it all out so she could leave. The sheriff just needed to go find him. Lucas might have the supernatural strength of ten men, but tranquilizers or bullets would still take him down

“Kira, sweetheart, why don’t you come on over here and lie down? Let me get you something to drink. What about food? Are you hungry? Sometimes low blood sugar can do things to the mind.” While she contemplated his question of food and drink, the door to the sheriff’s office swung open and her stepfather strode in.

“What are you doing here?” This was a bad sign. She needed to get out now. She backed up a few steps.

“Honey, when you passed out on my sofa I was worried so I called your daddy to come and get you.”

Oh great, just what she needed. The sheriff was so gullible. So human.

“He’s not my daddy,” Kira gritted out.

“It’s true, Sheriff, I’m just her stepfather.” He turned, facing her, his gaze raking over her appearance. “Sheriff, thank you for calling me. You were right, Kira does look ill and in need of her family’s assistance.”

Cringing at his words, Kira wondered about her chances of escaping here and not being caught by Lucas. She might rather take her chances with him rather than return to the clan.

“Lawrence, you might want to take her by the doc’s office. I think she might have a fever. She seems delirious. Been going on about a man in the Dragon turning into a big cat and attacking her and another woman.” He shook his head in disbelief, getting up from the couch.

“Thanks, Dave, I’ll get her back home to her momma and she’ll get her fixed right up.” Grasping Kira by the arm, harder than he needed to, he led her out of the sheriff’s office to his car he’d left running outside. The sheriff followed them out and watched them go.

She jerked her arm free and considered a last chance attempt at running away. Where could she go? Once inside the car, he chuckled. “Well, Kira, it looks like all that running you did was for nothing. You’ve really gotten yourself into a hole this time, telling the sheriff Clan secrets.”

“It’s not as if he believed them.”

“Doesn’t matter, and you know that. It looks like the Council is going to have to take care of you once and for all.”

* * * *

Three days later, Lucas returned home. As he approached his house, he was thankful that no one would be there waiting for him. He wasn’t sure he was ready to see Kane yet, but he knew he’d have to face him soon. Something was seriously wrong and had been eating at him for days.

The last time he’d seen Kira in his dreams, she’d seemed hopeless and sad. He’d been so angry with her over her betrayal he had refused to listen to what she’d been trying to tell him. He wished now he had listened. His instincts now screamed at him to find her. She was in some sort of serious trouble. After finally letting go of his stupid pride, he’d tried reaching out to her mind but had found nothing.

When he slept he dreamt about her continuously, but the dreamwalking had ended. He only dreamt of what had been. But every time just before he woke, he would hear her plead with him. *Help me. Please.* It really was driving him insane. He needed her so badly. He was in a constant state of arousal and his being in solitude this time had made him miserable. He really needed a good—

“What the hell?” He froze. He’d been wrong. Someone was waiting for him. He considered shifting when he caught the unfamiliar scent of a stranger, but decided to wait. *Better see who it is before I get all grrr.*

Lucas opened the door and came face to face with Kane.

The banked anger surged forward and it took everything he had to tamp it back down. He swore he would talk this out and save the ass kicking for afterwards.

Kane raised his hands up in surrender. “I know I’m probably the last person you want to see right now, but I have to talk to you. I’ve been searching for you for two days.”

“Probably? Are you kidding me? I definitely don’t want to see you right now. What could be so damned important you have to barge in here now? Not a good idea to test my patience right

now, bro.” He stormed through the door, throwing his bag into the corner to deal with later.

“It’s Kira.”

At the sound of her name coming from Kane’s lips, Lucas’ blood boiled over and he tackled his brother to the ground. They wrestled around for a few minutes before Kane gave up and let Lucas pin him to the floor. With his arm across Kane’s neck, Kane had to struggle to talk.

“Damn it, Lucas, give me a chance to tell you what I came for. If it wasn’t life or death, I wouldn’t be here.” Lucas glared at him, watching his face contort in pain, studying his eyes for any sign of deceit. Finally he relented and pushed himself off of his brother.

Kane rubbed his neck. “There’s something about Kira you don’t know.” Lucas flashed a venomous look at his brother. “Wait, I know you want to kill me but at least let me finish.” His anger under a semblance of control, the pain in his heart resurfaced making it difficult to look at Kane. “Her Council has sentenced her to death to be carried out in less than twenty-four hours.” Lucas abruptly sat on the arm of the chair. “She has a mental disease that afflicts all of her kind. Once her mating call begins, she has a finite amount of time to complete the mating ritual before she loses her mind to complete chaos. When that happens, her clan’s Council issues a death sentence.”

“What? Why death?” He was so confused by this. But somehow it fit with their last conversation.

“Apparently, their Council, just like ours, fears exposure to humans as the greatest crime against themselves. They think the only way to control this exposure is to eliminate any and all threats.”

Kane paced now, but Lucas needed to know more. Although he understood that vigilance all too well. He’d been forced to carry out sentences as well. It was an archaic system but one that had worked for centuries.

“Is Kira lost? Has her mind already shut down?” His mind raced through the possibilities. “Why the hell didn’t she tell me this? I would have saved her...probably.” He frowned at his brother. “How the hell do you know all of this?”

Kane hesitated. “Her mother came looking for you two days

ago. Since her daughter's return and subsequent sentencing, she has been chanting your name. Her Council fears for everyone's safety and have locked her up."

Fear stabbed at him. "Am I too late? No, don't say it. I don't care what your answer is. I refuse to believe I'm too late to save her. Where the hell is she? Why the fuck didn't I know all about this before? It's my fucking job to know everything about the other Dragon clans," he raged, his heart constricting as if someone had a vise on it. He couldn't breathe. Picking up the side table, he threw it across the room, smashing it into the door. Panting, he looked back at Kane "Tell me where she is. Now, damn it! I'm going to get her."

Kane turned to the bureau in the hall and fished out a piece of paper from the top drawer.

"What's that?" Lucas impatiently watched his brother unfold the paper and hand it to him.

"This is a map to your mate. Kira's mother came here desperate for me to find you and get you to help her daughter. Says you are the only one who can. She left this for you."

He snatched the paper from his brother and examined the hand scrawled drawings and words. He recognized some of the mountains and caves depicted but the actual underground cell was an unknown. Obviously her clan had managed to keep this area a pretty good secret from outsiders.

"What about guards? I don't see anything here about them."

"There's a small guard post here." Kane pointed to a small shack on the map about one hundred fifty yards south of the underground holding cells.

"This looks too easy." Lucas rubbed his face and thought long and hard about Kira. Easy or not didn't really matter, he would be going for her but they did need to be smart about this.

"They aren't expecting any trouble. According to her mother, there has never been an incident of escape."

"They just kill off their unmated women? That's pretty fucked up." The injustice of it stabbed Lucas like a hot poker.

"This coming from the Guardian who deals death for a bunch of old men deciding fates based on some ancient laws of our own."

The bite of Kane's words hit deep and he had to hide the

wince behind it. "Point taken." Kane knew he struggled with his orders at times but this was hardly the time to get into that.

"We've got to go now, there isn't much time left." Kane glanced at the duffel bag propped next to the door. I've already packed some essentials."

"I'm driving."

* * * *

They took the back roads toward MacDonald land as far as the terrain would allow. About a half mile from the backside of the mountain where the cells were located, they had to park the Jeep, hiding it behind a stand of trees and brush. Lucas took a deep breath, filtering through the scents that flooded him until he found the one he was looking for.

"I've got her." He muttered as he removed his clothes and tossed them on the seat. He shifted and ran, knowing he didn't have to worry about Kane—he would keep up. Within minutes they found the underground cell in which Kira was being held. Shifting back into human form, Lucas and Kane cautiously approached the small cave. They had easily slipped past the two-man guard post twenty-five yards back and they were almost there. The cave was carved out and dimly lit but around the first bend there were a line of cells and the air was ripe with Kira's fear.

Lucas ran to the cell but stopped short when he heard the noises coming from inside. Listening to Kira chanting his name worried him. Would he be able to save her from herself? The lock on the door was no match for his strength and easily gave way when he pulled on it. He eased the door open slowly so as to not frighten her.

Crouched in the corner, she didn't notice him walk in. As he approached he spoke. "Kira. Kira, honey, it's me."

At the sound of his voice she started shrieking at the top of her lungs. In the cave the sound was amplified and would surely carry to the guardhouse. Lucas flew to her side, grabbed her body up against his and covered her mouth to stop the screams. She blindly fought him, trying to get loose. Her strength shocked him but Lucas held her.

Kane came running in. "What the hell is going on in here? Are you trying to get us killed?"

She continued screaming against his hand as well as kicking him to get away.

"I don't think she recognizes me. She's scared to death and frantic to get loose."

"We're never going to get her out of here like this. Lucas, you are going to have to perform the mating ritual right here, right now."

"And how do you suppose I'm going to do that with her kicking and screaming? Do you suggest I tie her up and gag her?" Kane didn't answer him right away and he looked up at him. "Uh, no don't even go there. It's not going to work. We have to get her calm in order for me to mate with her and bite her mark at the same time." Lucas struggled with a solution. He had to do something and do something quick. If they didn't get out of here soon, they would be discovered and he didn't think her Council's reaction to his interference would go in his favor.

"Kane, get over here and see if you can help me calm her down." Lucas shifted so Kira's back was up against the front of his body, one arm wrapped around her waist the other covering her mouth tightly. "I can't let go or she'll alert the whole damn clan with her screams."

Kane walked in front of her and tried talking to her, trying to soothe her fears while Lucas did the same at her ear. She continued to wiggle and squirm but appeared to calm a little. "She may not be sure who we are, Lucas, but I can—uh—smell her desire. Your rubbing up against her body is having a definite effect." A growl sounded in his chest. Kane held up his hands in surrender. "I'm just saying."

Lucas forced himself to relax, the mating messed a little with his own control as well, but deep down where it mattered he knew he could trust Kane.

"Her arousal is having an effect. An effect on me." His fully aroused cock pressed firmly up against the top of her buttocks. The more she wriggled and fought with him, the harder he became. He could easily take her now if they just get her calm and quiet. If he couldn't tell her how he was feeling he needed to show her. "I can't believe I am going to say this, but I think we

are going to have to do this together.” Kane stared at him completely dumbfounded.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” Kane mumbled, backing up a few steps.

“We have to. We probably don’t have much more time here and I’m going to have to let go of her to complete the ritual. It’s not as if we haven’t done this many times before just for fun.”

“No thanks. You’ll just want to kill me all over again when this is over. Nope.”

They didn’t have time for this. So he swallowed his pride. “Please, brother, help me save my mate.” He didn’t have to ask again.

Kane stepped closer to Kira, pressing his body up against hers. She was sandwiched tightly between the two men, which hampered her efforts at getting loose. Lucas used all of his strength to contain and quiet her while Kane started a slow and easy seduction.

Threading his hands through her hair, Kane brought his lips down to her neck, and with light nibbles he worked his way across her shoulder. Lucas grinned as Kira’s attempts to scream against his hand turned into whimpers. She still struggled, but he didn’t think she really wanted to get away any longer. Still, he held on to her tightly and brought his own lips down on the back of her neck.

Despite her loss of control, her mating call was still upon her, driving her body to mate. It wouldn’t cease until her true mate completed the ritual. Him. He was her only chance. His heart clutched. What would they do if she survived tonight? Would she ever believe his true feelings? He couldn’t think of that right now. He had to save her. Her life was more important than her anger.

He savored the unique sweet and tart taste of her skin. How he had missed that. Looking over her shoulder, he saw Kane take her stiff nipple into his mouth for a long suckle. Despite his reluctance to admit it, watching Kane lick and nibble her plump breast turned him on even more. It gave him a thrill watching her try to push her passion swollen breast full into his mouth. Under his hand she moaned in pleasure. Yes, she was coming around.

Trailing his tongue along the contours of her back, she

showed her appreciation by wiggling her jean-clad ass against his barely contained erection. “Kane, take off her pants. I need to touch her pussy.” He eagerly complied, practically ripping the pants from her body.

Lucas slid his hand down the smooth expanse of her belly, diving right into her tight red curls, seeking her clit. She was ready for him. So wet. He wished he had time to lap up all of her cream. Such a shame for all that sweetness to go to waste but there would be time later. If she forgave him.

She was about to become his mate. A fact that neither of them took lightly. His breath hitched at the thought and his cock was near to bursting. He would have to make this up to her when she recovered. Show her with every touch how much she meant to him. Kira thrashed around in his arms, not because she wanted to get away but in a renewed desperation to be fucked.

He removed his hand from her mouth, releasing her moans. Her fear was now gone and replaced with an eagerness for more of them both. Removing his arms from around her waist, her hands frantically grabbed for Kane’s cock, and she bent down to take him in her mouth. Kane groaned as Kira took him all the way in. Watching her slide Kane’s shaft in and out of her mouth made him hot as hell. Her pink tongue darted out of her mouth to circle the ruby red swollen head. Lucas groaned and fisted his throbbing dick as he imagined those lush lips wrapped around him, sucking him dry.

“Suck him harder, Kira,” he demanded. “Focus on how good he feels and listen to my voice.”

Kane hissed in appreciation and tightened his hands in her hair.

Kira bent over Kane, sucking his cock, left her ass up in the perfect position for him to take her. Grasping her hips, he spread the cheeks of her ass, revealing the tight little hole. Oh, how he wanted to explore that spot. Imagining how tight it would squeeze around him, he sighed. Another time, when he could be sure she understood his dominance and all that entailed.

He drove himself into her pussy in one hard thrust. She screamed around Kane’s cock, pushing him deeper in her throat.

She was so snug around him it was hard for him to think. Perfect for him. “Mine. Mine. Mine,” Lucas chanted as he

pounded into her repeatedly. Reaching around between their bodies, he pinched her clit, thrusting her into her own orgasm.

Kane grunted. "I can't hold off much longer. I am going to come." He pinched her nipples and jerked his hips, thrusting his cock in and out of her mouth.

As Kira's pussy milked Lucas' cock through her orgasm, he too couldn't take much more. Not when all he'd thought about for days was how much he missed her next to him, her lips kissing him or her body wrapped around his, experiencing more pleasure than ever before.

Maybe she would argue he only wanted her because of the mating call, but he didn't think so. Nature created lust and desire for each other, but caring about her and possibly loving her couldn't be created through fate. Reaching across her back, he lifted her hair exposing her mark. Bending across her body, he swirled his tongue around the cougar that flamed with their heat.

"So beautiful," he panted at her ear.

Kane cursed on a groan as he came in her mouth and that, along with her pussy spasming around his cock, were too much for Lucas. This was it. He had to complete the ritual now.

Once they mated it fused a bond for life. All manner of choice for him would be gone. His independence lost forever. The consequences of their mating made his head spin, but one truth was more important than any other...

She would die without this.

Unable to hold back anymore, he thrust his canines into the mark, breaking the skin as his semen blasted into her womb. The pleasure was intense. His legs wobbled, nearly tumbling them to the floor. Kira's passion-laced moans faded and her body went limp as she passed into unconsciousness. Her skin under his lips was so hot it might melt. He jerked against the heat but his mouth locked to her skin. Strange images of Kira appeared in his mind. Kira as a child, hiding in the woods. As a teen, exploring her woman's body. Kira as she was now, running in the woods, scared for her life. Lucas' mouth flooded with the bitter taste of her fear. Finally, she appeared very much like now but with skin that glowed and her belly swollen with child. Tasting the sweetness of the love she felt, he was shocked to also find the sour taste of her sadness. Why would she be sad? His confusion

wrapped around him like a heavy wet blanket. What had they done?

When her flesh cooled, his mouth popped off of her skin, releasing his canines as his cock slid from her pussy. Lucas gently laid Kira down on the ground. Dressing quickly, he looked around the room for Kane. He found him in the doorway, his back turned to them.

“Kane, help me get her ready to go.” They needed to hurry and get back to his cabin. While the mating was complete and her clan could do nothing about that, he wasn’t sure they would accept the trespassing onto their sacred land. Not to mention his own clan might see fit to punish him for his actions. Yeah, his own Council. Tonight he had broken nearly every rule he’d been raised to protect. How many people had he banished for less than this? Including his older brother Malcolm...

“Holy shit! Why didn’t it come to me sooner?” Banishing Mal had been the worst thing he’d ever had to do as Guardian. The guilt had eaten at him for months, nearly driving him to leave the clan himself. It had been five long years since he had last seen Malcolm. Some of the pain and guilt of loss had faded but Malcolm had not been forgotten or forgiven.

“Lucas, what the hell are you talking about?” Kane demanded.

“It’s Mal. The entire time I was held prisoner there had been a subtle but familiar scent I couldn’t place.” Lucas scrubbed his face with his hands. “I hadn’t been sure about Lara or her motives and had pretty much concluded she had an accomplice. I could tell someone was masking but every time that bitch got too close I would get the tiniest hint of a smell I couldn’t place until now. Now I know.” His voice dropped dangerously low. “He’s the one responsible for my capture and Kira’s near death adventure with that witch Lara!”

Chapter Seven

Kira came awake with a parched throat and an aching body. Opening her eyes, she peered around the room. She recognized Lucas' bedroom in his cabin. Releasing a long breath, she wondered how she had gotten here.

She attempted to sit up but halted when a piercing pain stabbed through her shoulder. Puzzled, she reached to rub the spot and came in contact with a bandaged wound. Struggling, she stood and walked across the room to the mirror attached to the bureau. A sick feeling in the pit of her stomach warned her she might not be ready to face what she would see. Lifting the bandage, she stared agape at the two puncture marks in the middle of the Cougar.

Oh, God. No!

Kira called to the Tallan to recall what had happened. She fell to her knees as memories flooded her brain. Images of her being fucked by Lucas and Kane together and of Lucas biting her crowded her mind. She'd been completely out of control when they found her, unable to function in a normal capacity. Her body had demanded the mating from Lucas. Instincts had taken over and she'd been given the greatest ecstasy of her life. When Lucas' canines pierced the mark, her body had exploded in pleasure like nothing she had ever experienced before. The overload of sensations had splintered her body and soul, every nerve ending rippling in bliss. The orgasm had washed over them with shocking intensity. Even now, electricity from their joining still coursed through her veins. Her pussy heated and swelled at the memories, preparing her for another intense coupling with her mate.

Her body. The betrayer.

Speaking of betrayal, where the hell is Lucas?

She reached for his touch and found him on the front porch.

His mind swirled with angry emotions as he repeatedly punched the hell out of his heavy bag. She started to push further and stopped.

No, she wasn't quite ready to see the hatred that must surely burn there. His regret would kill her.

Unfortunately for her, she remembered everything she had said and done when her mind broke down. What she had done in the woods to Kane, the secrets she had spilled to the sheriff, even the unfounded fear she had experienced from Lara's death. She had betrayed her kind. And more importantly, she had betrayed Lucas.

Sweat dripped from her body as the stress and tension of the last few days tried to escape. Hands trembling, she pushed against the floor trying to get off of her knees. She gripped the edge of the short bureau and hauled herself back up. Damned if she wasn't going to pull herself together and face him. Lucas had mated them and now they were stuck. Ironically, she was mated to the man she loved. Yes, she could finally admit she had fallen in love with him. How could she not? Unfortunately for her, he would never love her back. And now her powers were linked to his will. The one thing she had feared the most.

Wiping away the lone tear that threatened to fall, she stood up tall and stiffened her spine. She had to face him, find out what his intentions were regarding her. If he thought to use her for her powers, well, he had another thing coming. If her abilities were now incomplete without him, so be it. She couldn't live out the rest of her extended life with a man who didn't love her. She had sworn to not be weak like her mother.

Checking her reflection in the mirror, she smoothed her hair, straightened her shoulders and declared herself ready. She looked a bit pale but she was more than ready to take on one overgrown house cat.

She yanked the door open and skidded to a stop. Lucas stood there, waiting.

"Going somewhere, darling?" he sneered. He must have been listening to her thoughts because he looked pissed off. Pissed, but damn gorgeous. Her eyes raked over his body. His chest was gloriously bare and covered with a light sheen of sweat from his workout. The golden, sun browned skin was

covered by that layer of fine hair that she knew would tickle her nipples when she rubbed up against him. His workout pants were loosely fastened and rode nice and low on his hips. So low in fact the curve of his groin muscle distracting her. A soft, betraying moan came from her throat and her fingers itched to reach out and pull the flimsy string that held his pants up. She wanted to see more of his glorious body. Saliva pooled in her mouth. She yanked her head back up, shaking it back and forth, forcing herself to look away to keep from drooling. She needed to get a grip. They would get nowhere if she couldn't stop thinking about licking him from head to toe.

A deep chuckle rumbled from his chest. "Are you planning to eat me alive?" His smart-ass attitude as effective as if he had dumped a glass of ice water over her head.

"I was on my way to find you. To demand some answers." His eyes hardened like chips of ice and, just like that, the easy laugh disappeared. Fine, it would be easier for her if he stayed cold and distant. Just seeing him like this in front of her made her want to drag him down to the floor and grind her body on his cock.

"Sounding a little tart for a woman who just woke up from one hell of a destructive bender." She winced at his not so subtle accusations. He had every right to be angry with her. She should have just told him what was happening to her. Instead, her pride had demanded her silence and now she would pay the steep price.

"Why, Lucas? Why would you mate with me after everything I've done? Was it some sort of warped sense of obligation to save me? That's exactly what I didn't want to happen. Knowing you felt sorry for me enough to sacrifice yourself makes me sick." The acid in her stomach came to life, making her statement a churning reality. "I need to get away from here and get back to my life." She knew it was the right thing to do, even if she had to pay for the sacrifice everyday for the rest of her life.

"Damn, woman, you are the most stubborn female I have ever met, not to mention the most talkative right now."

She opened her mouth, about to fire off a retort but his hand came up and pressed against her lips. "My turn, Kira." She

nodded. "It's true that I couldn't bear to let you die that way. What kind of person would I be if I did?"

Emotion clogged her throat at his words. He was a warrior just like her, and to people like them, sacrifice would not be too high a price for a life.

"Don't you get it? You're *my* mate just as much as I am yours." He grasped her shoulders and pulled her up against his chest. "Do you even understand the implications of mating with a shapeshifter? There are good reasons why we don't mate very often." As confusion bloomed inside her, he crushed her mouth with his lips. Spearing his tongue into her mouth, she could taste his anger and frustration. "It's impossible for you to leave me now, or I you. We can no longer survive without each other."

She couldn't really process what he said while he stroked her skin. His rough hands abrading across her flesh sent shivers down her back. Her senses heated up and she wanted nothing more than to beg him for more.

What had she been about to say? She couldn't remember. Couldn't think. Only wanted more. Rubbing her hands up his chest, she flicked his flat nipples lightly. His sharp intake of breath was a glorious reward and she flicked them again. He growled and bit her lip. The pleasure/pain sensation shot straight to her pussy as her juices flowed to her thighs.

Moving over to Lucas' ear, she showered him with soft kisses before biting down. She didn't know what was with all of the biting, but it felt good and right. The two of them panted and their hearts raced in beat together. She didn't care. Her only thought was of fucking. She needed him and needed him now. Dropping to her knees, she pulled the damn string that taunted her earlier and ripped the sweatpants from his body. His cock bounced up against his belly, rebounding right against her lips. She flicked out her tongue and captured it to her.

He growled again. "Yes, baby. Put it between those lush lips of yours. I need you to suck it so bad." His words heightened her need even further as she wrapped her hands around his shaft, guiding his erection to her eager mouth. The satiny smooth head pulsed against her. Oh, she wanted more. She hungrily engulfed the entire length of his cock, caressing the sensitive underside with her tongue. His skin tasted of salt and spice. Oh, so manly.

It still wasn't enough. Her clit pulsed, begging to be touched. She released one hand from his cock and slid her hands inside her own shorts in search of her pulsing need.

"Yes, baby, suck my cock while you touch yourself. Show me how much you need me." He fisted her hair and pulled her even further onto himself. His hips began a nice, even thrusting as her fingers stroked her own clit with the same rhythm.

He rocked faster. "Kira, it's too good. You're going to make me come." She sucked harder—wanting it, begging for it. After a few more shallow thrusts, he pulled his cock from her suckling mouth. She mewled in protest.

"No, baby, I'm not coming yet. I have to taste you. Your new scent is about to make me fucking crazy."

"New scent?"

"Oh, yeah. You're marked now and every cat around will know it. You carry my scent as well as yours. It calls to me." Flipping her onto her back, right there on the carpet, he spread her legs as wide as he could. "Look at you, so beautiful and hot. Making me crazy with need." Slowly, way too slowly, he licked her slit from her opening straight up to her hard little protruding clit.

"God, Lucas, you're torturing me." She tried to wiggle harder up against his tongue but his hands held her legs tightly. He wouldn't give her the control she so desperately wanted. Her need began to border on pain as he delved one finger inside her pussy. More. She wanted more. She wanted him to fill her and make her scream. She grabbed his hair and pulled hard. "Lucas, if you don't fuck me right this second I am going to kick your ass!" In retaliation for her outburst, he bit at her clit and added a second finger to the first, further stretching her tight channel.

"Maybe that's just what you need, sweetheart. A little ass whipping. And I'm just the man to give it to you." Withdrawing his fingers from her clenching pussy, he flipped her onto her stomach and pulled her up onto her knees. Before she even had a chance to respond, she received a hard, stinging smack right on her ass.

Too stunned by his actions to speak, her body flamed from the pleasurable sting. With each subsequent blow, her clit pulsed harder. "Lucas, please I need you so bad," she begged. She

couldn't help it. Her body was in control, not her mind. The only thing she wanted was his cock in her pussy right now. She reached for her aching flesh, desperate for relief, but he pushed her hand away.

"No, only I get to touch it now." He smacked her ass again, simultaneously filling her sex with his hard, thick length.

She screamed out from the intense pleasure of the stinging of her ass combined with his dick stretching her. His hands grabbed her cheeks and spread them wide.

"Kira, I'm going to take you here, too." The words were spoken as a demand not a choice. No one had ever taken her that way but here in this moment she didn't care. Caution and worry were gone, replaced by a driving, frenzied need as she pushed harder against his cock, striving for deeper penetration. She belonged to Lucas heart and soul and would give him what he wanted.

"Yes, Lucas—" Before she even finished her plea for more, he pressed the tip of his finger into the ultra tight hole. Stars exploded behind her eyes and she instinctively pushed back driving both his hard cock and long finger deeply inside her. The intense sensations sizzled through her blood as her muscles clenched around him in an explosive orgasm.

He roared his satisfaction, pumping hard inside her body. He added a second finger to her ass, further stretching her opening. Just when she was sure he was nearing his own orgasm, he pulled completely from her body. The shock of his sudden absence made her legs tremble, too weak to look back to see what he was doing.

But she didn't need to see, she knew what was coming.

His fingers delved into her, dipping in and out and covering them with her juices. Like in her dreams, those fingers moved up to her ass, pushing into the tight hole and rubbing them around.

He was lubricating her. Preparing her for his cock. She shuddered, somewhat frightened by how much she wanted it.

Then his cock was at the opening, pushing past her tight ring of muscles, forcing it in. Her body tensed up when it started to burn, a soft cry escaping her lips.

"Relax, Kira, trust me, baby. It will hurt less if you relax." As he pushed his cock ruthlessly inside he sparked against

unexplored pleasure points. He pressed further and the combination of pleasure and pain threatened to throw her headlong into another orgasm.

Finally seated, he bent across her backside whispering into her ear. "Do not come, Kira. Not until I say so. Do you hear me?" Her heart raced and her body shook as she tried to control the flash of heat building within. "Kira?"

"Yes, Lucas, I'm trying." Her words breathless from the struggle.

"If you come before I say so, I will punish you." He slowly pulled back, swamping her with a dark pleasure burning out of control.

"Oh God, Lucas, it's too much, I—I can't take it." Sweat beaded on her body as she continued the fight, holding back the explosion.

"No! Not yet." Lucas slammed in and out of her ass harder, forcing her orgasm to the surface.

"Please—please." Her words died as she lost the fight for control and her body splintered flying apart. Her screams filled the room, long and loud. The climax hitting her so hard all she heard was the blood roaring in her head.

"Yes, baby. You're mine now, Kira. I'm coming." She clamped down on his dick pulsing in her ass as his cum shot from him, filling her body, pushing her orgasm farther than she thought possible.

Time passed as they bucked and thrashed against each other, unable to quell the sensations. Pleasure, warmth, and most of all love flowed between them as their bodies stilled.

Lucas collapsed over her as he slipped from her ass. He mumbled something to her but she didn't hear what he said. He'd exhausted her, and she needed more sleep. Her last thought before succumbing was despite everything she had put him through she didn't want to give him up.

Chapter Eight

While Kira lay sleeping, Lucas caressed her hip, marveling at the round fullness of her shape. Amazed how every curve of her body fit perfect against his. Unsure if he had gone too far with her, he worried how she would look at him when she woke. Still possessed by anger, he'd wanted to claim her in his own way as well as punish her for what she'd done to him.

She was incredible. She not only submitted to his darker desires and needs, but embraced them with a wanton desire of her own. Instead of trying to stop his invasion, she had prodded him to succumb to his aggressive nature. Remembering her fervent responses, his cock stirred to life again. Unbelievably, he wanted to roll her over and take her again.

Shaking his head to clear his mind, he gently got up from the bed. This time he'd go out for a run instead. Shifting would free his mind of his problems, giving him a clear shot at deciding the best course of action from here.

Despite everything they had been through together, she still thought to leave him. *Maybe I should just tie her to the bedposts and sexually torment her until she admits the truth. She won't leave me. I won't allow it.* He left the room with quite the wicked grin spreading across his face.

* * * *

The crisp mountain air ruffled his fur as he sprang across the stream. The freedom and power he experienced in his animal form exhilarated him. Due to the harsh terrain of the Dragon, there were few humans who ventured off the nearby mountain road, leaving Lucas and his clan free to roam the land as they saw fit. It was rare that anyone from outside his clan tried to harm any of them. But occasionally one of their kind would be

spotted and reported, but with no evidence it got chalked up to the smaller native bobcat. Mountain lions, cougars, and panthers were all considered extinct east of the Mississippi except in a small region of Florida. Little did they know. The other two clans living in the Dragon, while only separated by a few miles from each other, kept to themselves.

In the two decades that Lucas had served his clan as Guardian, only a handful of its members had tried to break the laws and mate outside. All who did were banished. Once gone from the clan, their psychic powers would diminish until after about three years they would completely disappear. Leaving them to live out the rest of their extended lives as humans.

Just like—

Lucas stopped in his tracks. The wind carried a familiar scent to his nostrils. One he hadn't scented in these woods in a very long time. A low growl reverberated in his chest. Adrenalin coursed through his veins and his hair stood on end. Snarling, he turned to face the intruder.

"Hello, Lucas." The man chuckled nastily. "Surprised to see me?"

Lucas quickly shifted back to human form. Startled confusion gave way to white hot anger as he looked upon his older brother, Malcolm, for the first time in five years.

"What the hell are you doing here? I could kill you for returning here without permission," he spat.

"Careful, brother. Considering what you've just done, I don't think you've the right to judge me any longer."

Shit, he was right. Mating with Kira was just as bad as Malcolm's crimes, at least according to the Council.

Still, he and Kira weren't going to be risking clan exposure to mortals anytime soon. Unlike Malcolm, they honored those rules and traditions and were willing to put their lives on the line for those beliefs.

"What do you hope to accomplish by coming here today? Haven't you done enough damage already?" Lucas wasn't sure that Mal was responsible for his kidnapping but his showing up here seemed like questionable timing and he wasn't sure how to handle it.

"I want my abilities back. No longer being able to shift has

long term repercussions I don't think anyone was aware of." Lucas wondered what he could be talking about. Mal looked perfectly healthy to him. In fact he looked remarkably just like the day he had left the Dragon. Big, strong, and cocky.

"What the hell are you talking about, Mal? We didn't do anything to your abilities." For some weird reason, that made Malcolm laugh. An evil sounding laugh, but a laugh nonetheless.

"Still a blind slave to the Council, huh? Guess you're never going to learn." Malcolm's mocking tone raked over his skin. Lucas' arm shot out and grasped Malcolm by the neck, choking him. Mal grabbed his hand but didn't pull himself free.

"What's wrong, Mal, Cat got your tongue?" His brother had some nerve showing up here and insulting him. Lucas was spoiling for a fight and he figured Malcolm had arrived just in time to give him one. "Have you come to try and take the big bad Guardian down? Fine. Let's go"

Still Malcolm didn't pull free from Lucas' grasp. He was pulling at Lucas' hand but not hard enough to break free.

"I—I can't. You're choking me." Malcolm's face turned a nice shade of red as if he struggled from Lucas' grip. Lucas let go of Malcolm and turned his back, walking away. His brother had changed and it wasn't for the better. Malcolm disgusted him.

"Lucas, for God's sake, listen to what I am telling you. My extra strength is gone, I can't shift anymore, and I think I might be dying." Lucas stopped dead in his tracks.

"Don't bullshit me, Mal. What do you *really* want?" he replied in a low, frustrated voice.

"I need your help. You can help me get back what I've lost and in return I will help you save your mate. But we have to hurry or it'll be too late."

Lucas' blood ran cold at the distinct scent of truth coming out of his brother's mouth.

* * * *

Kira leaned back in her chair, relaxing and soaking up the sun. She had awoken to an empty cabin *again* and, after a quick shower, decided she needed some fresh air.

Mulling over all the events of the last few days, Kira

couldn't believe that she was mated and in love. What a mess she had gotten herself into. What had Lucas meant about what happens when his race mates? Would something happen to either of them when she went home? When she left, would she be able to adjust to the loss of her powers?

So wrapped up in her own personal demons, Kira failed to sense someone approaching.

Hearing a deck board creak behind her, Kira twisted around and found Lara looming over her. The smile on Lara's face twisted Kira's stomach into knots. Before she was able to say or do anything, Lara flung an energy ball straight for Kira's head.

Fighting panic, Kira dove to the ground, barely evading the deadly strike. Her heart racing, Kira mentally pushed Lara across the deck into the rear wall of the cabin, momentarily knocking the wind out of the other woman.

"What exactly is your fucking problem? This is getting so old." She was sick and tired of this witch popping up to cause trouble over and over. "What do you want from me?" Her jaw clenched, her eyes narrowed slightly as she stared down at the prone witch.

"I don't care one way or another about you. I have a job to complete here. Then at least one of the Gunn Guardians can pay for what they did to me." Her lips were twisted in a nasty, angry snarl, but something else wavered in her eyes for just a second, sadness maybe, and then it was gone. Replaced by the blood red color of rage.

"What did they do to you? And what does it have to do with me?" Kira scanned the surrounding area for her options. The deck was flat and open but if she could make it off the deck she could take cover in the tree line surrounding the cabin. Before she got a chance to make a run for it, three more energy balls whizzed by her head.

Fuck, that was close! She is really pissing me off. I'd like to shove one of those energy balls down her goddamn throat.

Kira mentally pushed again at Lara but she got nothing. After the last psychic push Lara had erected a shield around herself. Now Kira's only option was to get the hell off the deck and make a run for it. The next energy ball Lara threw, Kira mentally redirected to a nearby wooden table. On impact the

table burst into flames, distracting Lara. Kira ran, her feet pounding against the wood and off the deck and into the nearby tree line.

Lucas! Where the hell are you? I'm on the run from Lara and headed in a south, southwesterly direction from the back of the cabin. She frantically tried to touch Lucas' mind with all her power.

I'm almost there, baby. Just a few miles away. There's an unmarked densely covered path that will lead you straight toward the river. Follow it. Hurry. We'll meet you there. Unbelievably, having him in her head centered her. Her focus seemed sharper and her body surged with power as she ran as hard as she could, her feet pounding the ground as fast as her heart raced.

Kira. Stay safe, baby.

She ran, enjoying the flow of power through her when suddenly she was jerked from the path. Someone grabbed her arm and yanked her down as she passed. Stubby fingers dug into the flesh of her arm, pushing her to the ground face first. The sheer force of being grabbed from a dead run and then flung to the ground caused a sharp wave of nausea to rise in her throat. Gasping for breath, she took in deep gulps of air in the hopes of finding her equilibrium fast. She yanked her arm out the grasp, swiveling quickly onto her back to see who had grabbed her.

Realization dawned as the true betrayal sank in. "Lawrence, what the fuck are you doing here?" She rubbed her arms furiously, trying to ease the ache from his surprisingly strong grip. "You could have hurt me." Despite the nausea threatening to take her down again, she sprang up ready to run. "We've got to get out of here now. There's a crazy assed black witch trying to kill me. We have got to hide from—" the words froze in her throat as she spotted his weapon.

"You're not going anywhere." He leveled a gun at her chest to make his point abundantly clear. "I've had enough of this crap. I should have known that if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself."

Something clicked in her mind. Her stepfather was standing here holding a gun on her. All along he had wanted her out of the way one way or another. The way he had treated her mother all

these years wasn't enough. He had finally come for her.

"Why are you doing this? What do you want from me?" She took a step back trying to put a little distance between herself and Lawrence's gun.

"Don't be a stupid little bitch. You know what this is about. Power. You have more than you deserve and I want it."

"What the hell are you talking about? How can you take my powers from me? Killing me only takes them away from me."

"Come on, girlie, I thought you were brighter than that. Don't be so narrow-minded." When Kira failed to respond he continued. "The black witch. Why else would I need a witch to help get rid of you?" he replied.

Lara burst through the trees, stopping just shy of plowing over Lawrence. With her eyes blazing red and hair standing on end, she seemed a woman gone way over the edge.

"'Bout time you showed up. I guess you can't even handle one little girl," he sneered at Lara. He might be using Lara to take care of some dirty work, but he clearly thought her less than dirt. "Can you put a spell on her to prevent her from using her psi powers? I can feel her connection with her cat and if we don't break that fast we're going to be having a nasty little party here real soon."

Lara's expression was thunderous towards Lawrence and Kira held her breath, waiting to see what she would do. Surprisingly she did a quick chant and with a simply wave of her hand Lucas disappeared. Blocked from Kira's mind. She was on her own. Panic like she'd never known welled up in her throat, threatening to choke her. *Remember your training. Remember your training. Stay calm.*

"It's done. I've temporarily bound her powers. It's now or never because that spell won't hold her long. You do know what will happen when you kill her, right? With their powers now bound together, if one dies they both die. It's what makes them so powerful together."

Kira gasped. That couldn't be right.

Probably just the ramblings of a crazed witch hell bent on killing her.

"I could care less about her shifter. If he had followed the rules set up ages ago, he wouldn't be in this mess." Turning his

gaze solely to Kira, he tightened the grip on his gun. "You're coming with us right now. I need to take care of this without any more interruptions."

Kira thought desperately for another solution. If they got her away from here, it would be all over for her.

Where the hell was Lucas? *Well, if I can't reach him mentally why not use the good old-fashioned way?* Kira opened her mouth and released a blood-curdling scream.

By the look on Lawrence's face, she thought he would shoot her right then. Instead he raised his arm and cold cocked her with the butt of the gun. As she crumpled to the ground in agony, everything faded away in slow motion.

* * * *

Kira's screams reverberated through Lucas' head. He heard them mentally as well as physically. The pain of her fear rippled over his body as skin gave way to fur. His shift was instantaneous as well as uncontrolled.

He and Malcolm had been searching the area near the river for her when she screamed. With barely a glance to Malcolm, he sprinted after her. Blood thundered through his body as he raced to find her in time.

If she's hurt someone will die, and it won't be me.

Bursting through the trees to see Lawrence dragging an unconscious Kira by the hair, he leapt across the clearing to get to her before her stepfather had a chance to react. In one swift move, Lucas sank his razor sharp teeth into Lawrence's arm and, with the sickening sounds of bones and cartilage popping, he crushed the arm leaving it useless and unable to hold Kira.

His bloodlust far from sated, he turned his attentions to the witch. She lifted her chin, meeting his angry gaze straight on as he stalked towards her. Electricity sparked from her fingertips as she prepared to strike at him.

She chuckled.

"You're the first to pay. You Guardians judge innocents without a care to the consequences. Now the not so innocent judges you." Her eyes glowed red as she prepared for battle. "Today you die for the crimes of the Guardians."

Flinging her right arm at him, an energy ball came straight at him. He easily avoided it by jumping out of its path. Too late, he realized his move left Kira exposed. Lara threw another ball at Kira, aiming for her heart. Lucas lunged across Kira to protect her just as the damaging ball hit his hind leg. He crumpled to the ground in front of Kira's body. He wasn't dead but the damage was done. He couldn't move. His flesh and fur burned in white hot agony as his body shifted back to human form. A raw and primitive grief for Kira consumed him as he watched helplessly as Lara prepared her final blow.

Rubbing her hands together, she created a blast the size of a bowling ball. Strong enough to go through both of them at the same time if he wasn't mistaken.

Before she could deliver the final blow, she crumpled to the ground. Malcolm was left standing behind her holding a large tree branch he'd used to strike Lara.

"About damn time you showed up." Lucas' tongue was heavy with sarcasm but in reality he was grateful to have Malcolm's help.

Malcolm strode over to Lucas to survey the damage. After a few painful pokes and prods, he turned back to check on the others.

"What the hell? Where did she go?" Malcolm snarled.

"Looks like she's disappeared on us again." Lucas groaned. He really didn't like leaving loose ends. Again.

"She'll be back. It sounds like she has a plan for us."

Chapter Nine

Lucas knew Kira watched him pace. The thought of nearly losing her in the woods while he was out goofing off tormented him. His brothers had recently finished with their questioning in the council chambers and now they all waited to hear their fate. To say it was nerve-wracking was a massive understatement.

“Lucas, you’re making me nervous.” Her voice held a slight tremor when she spoke.

“I’m tired of waiting. It’s taking them entirely too long to come to a decision.” He stared at the chamber door, willing someone to walk through it.

“You would never last five minutes in the military with your attitude.” She laughed and the soft lilt of that sound relaxed him a fraction. “Seriously, sometimes I think the entire military philosophy is built around *hurry up and wait*.”

“That’s not very logical.”

“You have no idea.” Again she spoke with a high voltage smile that lit up her face, reminding him how beautiful she was.

Desire arced between them as he stared down at her. They should be off alone somewhere instead of wasting their time here on a group of grumpy old men steeped in traditions that didn’t apply these days.

The door to the council chambers opened with a loud creak and Nick, Kane’s childhood friend and Council mouthpiece, came sauntering out to them in the hall. “They will see you now.”

Lucas looked down to his brothers, who both nodded at him. For the first time in a long time they would stand together despite some of the residual animosity between them. Facing Malcolm’s role in all of this would be difficult at best, but if they were all separated again the rift would grow, dividing them even further.

Malcolm and Kane filed into the room and Lucas turned to his mate. She looked at him with soft eyes shining with support, which left him no choice but to tip his head down and press his lips to hers. A familiar spark fired as his tongue slid over her lips and her mouth opened on a small sigh. His senses filled with everything about her—her scent, her taste, and her love. It was enough to bring a man to his knees.

“Come on, you two, you can get a room later,” Nick interrupted.

Lucas reluctantly released Kira’s mouth only to rest his forehead against hers.

“Whatever happens, we’ll be okay,” she reassured him despite the unease he sensed in her.

He nodded, grabbing her hand to follow Nick into the chamber.

When he stepped inside, the whole room reeked with old world tradition. The walls were lined with tomes filled with centuries of Scottish history as well as their newer American history. He’d never felt a draw to visit the homeland of his ancestry, but every time he’d entered this chamber in the past he’d experienced a surge of pride in all those pieces of history that shaped them to today.

Now he had doubt. Fate had delivered Kira as his mate and these nine men giving him cold, hard looks saw that as a bad thing. He would never agree with that. No one liked change no matter how it shaped history and he suspected this was only the beginning.

“We have come to a decision.” The simple statement was delivered in a cold, clipped tone by their leader. “In the case of Malcolm Gunn’s role in recent events: we find his motivations somewhat understandable and took his involvement in the outcome under advisement and have decided to wave the expected death sentence and instead will continue his banishment until this council decides otherwise.”

Kira squeezed his hand in encouragement and inside he breathed a sigh of relief while maintaining a blank and stoic appearance to the men in front of him.

“Secondly, in regards to the irrevocable mating between Lucas Gunn and Kira MacDonald, we find that you both have

broken the covenant between clans and you both are ordered to banishment from the clan for a period of no less than one year. At which time the council will review the periodic medical tests you will be required to undergo to study the effects of combining your psychic powers.”

Lucas stood there stunned. One year? He had expected far worse, but still the loss of guardianship stung.

“Furthermore, with the clan loss of its guardian, Kane Gunn will be appointed to take over the role from his brother.”

The deafening silence in the room after the verdict made him twitchy, although he would never show it.

After a few more long tense minutes the leader stood. “Gentlemen, I suggest you all get your acts together and consider the clan repercussions of your actions from here on out.”

One by one the Council filed out, leaving them to stand together...alone.

* * * *

After the council meeting, they’d gone in separate directions each needing time to deal with their fate and now Lucas was grateful to be back home with Kira in the peace and quiet they needed as he struggled with his emotions.

Not only had mating caused their life forces to be linked, but their combined psychic powers were stronger than any documented. It was a little intimidating. He’d been informed they would have to be extremely cautious until they learned how to develop and use their additional powers together. No wonder the Councils had always been so adamant about the races not mixing. These powers in the hands of a morally weak couple could wreak havoc on the clans as well as humans.

Under normal circumstances their actions would result in immediate and final banishment. These weren’t exactly normal times. He was still surprised that the ruling elders would allow the two of them with their enhanced powers to leave.

Lucas stopped in his tracks at the far side of the cabin from Kira and turned back to face her.

God, he loved her. He needed to claim her. Again.

Despite the fact they’d already been through the mating

ritual, he still regretted it had been under duress. He wanted her to come willingly to him. His need built so strong he thought his stiff cock would rip through his jeans at any second. He throbbed with want to the point of pain. He needed her right now.

He stalked her. Slowly moving toward her on the recliner. His nose catching the scent of her heat. He growled with pleasure, knowing he wasn't the only one who suffered. Without a word he scooped her up and carried her into the bedroom.

* * * *

Easing her onto the bed, he came down on top of her positioning his cock for maximum pressure against her clit.

"Lucas." She gasped. "We should talk. We have some serious logistics issues to figure out."

"No. Baby. Right now I have to fuck you. You are mine and I am yours, but if I don't get my cock into your tight slick cunt soon, I'm going to explode." With those words whispered in her ear, her pussy flooded. Her vaginal muscles clenched at the thought of him driving his thick cock inside her, taking what he needed.

Leaving no time for thought he covered her lips with his own and drove his tongue deep into her mouth to tangle with hers. He tasted of outdoors, musk, and man. It drove her wild. She flexed her hips up, causing added pressure from his cock against her clit.

"More. I want more," she begged.

He grinned against her lips. "I thought you wanted to talk."

"Shut up, Lucas."

"Then tell me, Kira. Tell me exactly what you want me to do to you." His tongue gently caressed and nibbled against her lips as he waited for her to tell him. The little nips shot sensations straight to her clit.

"I want your swollen cock in my mouth. I want to taste you again." Her hands roamed across his back and down to his muscled ass. Nails digging in, she encouraged him to rub harder against her pussy. She so desperately wanted to be naked she was tempted to rip the clothes away from both their writhing bodies.

“I want you thrusting deep and hard inside me, filling me, taking me.” Winding her hands around the front of his lightly furred chest, she pushed him with all her strength, rolling him off of her and onto his back. Jumping off the bed, she frantically removed her shirt and pants, her hard nipples protruding through the thin lace of her bra, begging for freedom.

Lucas tossed his own clothes across the room as she stripped off the last scraps of lace. “Come on, baby. Get back on this bed so I can taste those rosy nipples.” The more he talked about what he wanted to do to her, the more juice flowed from her sex.

Slowly, she crawled up his body, positioning herself between his legs. She brought her mouth within an inch of his thick, glorious rod, but instead of swallowing his cock into her mouth, she gently blew on it. It bounced against her lips in reaction. “Come on, baby. Suck my cock.” His voice was hoarse with need and she responded by flicking out her tongue and licking him from root to tip against the bulging vein and swirling around the deep plum colored head.

She was rewarded with a small bead of precum that she greedily lapped up. The salty taste of his essence sparked an intense, driving need in her as she swallowed his length as far as she could. With his strangled moan, she got a strong mental push from him, lighting a fire in her pussy. Her nipples tingled from the onslaught. Hell, her whole body tingled. As she eased her mouth back off his length, his hips bucked, trying to keep his cock in deep. She moaned around him.

“Suck it. Kira. Suck it harder.”

With her slow suckling, his cock swelled larger and his blood raced through his veins underneath her tongue. Kira knew if she kept this up much longer he would come soon. She wanted to feel him inside her, stretching her to the limits of pleasurable pain.

He pulled her off his cock and lifted her up into his lap. His enlarged head rubbed the outer lips of her pussy, spreading her moisture, from clit to entrance, further preparing her for his invasion.

She couldn’t take it anymore. She trembled with need. His rubbing drove her crazy. When he caressed again up against her

entrance she quickly pushed down, enveloping him into her tight channel on one hard thrust. His cock stretching and filling her momentarily took her breath away. The intense pleasure mixed with the slight pain of him stretching her to accommodate his width. His moans mingled with hers as they both fought to hold onto a thread of control.

“God, Kira. You’re so fucking tight and hot around my dick,” he panted.

Again his words stoked the flames within her. She bucked against him, trying to force him deeper still. The pleasure in her womb was building to an impossible level and she was close to her own release.

Without warning, Lucas grasped her around the waist and lifted her off of his pulsing cock. Pushing her down on her hands and knees, he quickly placed himself behind her. Pulling her ass tight against his hips, he eased his burning flesh into her tight channel, thrusting his hard cock up against her inner walls, igniting her explosive orgasm.

As she convulsed around him, he drove in and out of her hard, slamming deeper each time. His magical touch extended her orgasm out beyond anything she’d ever experienced before.

His fingers stroked her cougar tattoo. Her skin was on fire. Leaning over her back, he whispered in her ear. “This time it’s for real. Nature may have pushed us together, but today I freely give you my heart, Kira MacDonald.” With those words racing through her mind, and her vaginal muscles milking his cock for all it was worth, he sank his canines into the mark on her shoulder.

The quick surge of white-hot pain from his bite quickly subsided to pleasure as he spurted his hot semen against her clenching womb. Releasing her shoulder, he thrust through his own orgasm pushing her into another earth shattering explosion. His growl of pleasure turned into a full blown roar as he claimed her as his woman. Forever.

* * * *

Watching Lucas prepare them dinner, Kira admired the aura of the handsome man who now belonged to her. He had put on a

pair of jeans to come to the kitchen but had left his chest and feet bare. She gazed at his skin that had been bronzed by the sun, her fingers itching to caress his back as he'd done hers.

The depth of emotion that had poured from him and into her when he had mated with her again shook her. She had known that he for her, and God knew they both lusted after each other constantly, but when he bit her tattoo, everything he felt for her had flowed into her in that white hot flash.

He had opened his soul to her and shared his innermost thoughts with her. Memories of him and his brothers through the years, including the anguish he had suffered when he had been forced to banish his own brother. The loneliness he often felt as an isolated Guardian. Even the pain and fear he had experienced from all of her recent actions.

All of his actions thus far had proven him the man she could trust with her heart. She wanted to give him everything and see what happened. She needed to take the risk. If he ever tried to manipulate her, well, she'd just find a way to kick his ass.

She scooted towards him all the while watching the muscles in his back and arms flex with his movements. Her mouth watered. She wanted to taste his flesh again. But first she had to tell him how she felt.

Sliding their omelets on plates, Lucas turned towards the table nearly stumbling into Kira.

"Damn, woman. How do you manage to sneak up on me? No one else can come within fifty feet of me without my knowing." She merely stared, tongue-tied. "Let's eat, I'm starving." Still she didn't move or speak instead she was frozen by unfounded fear.

Snap out of it, Kira.

Her heart was racing, her palms sweating. "Kira, what's wrong, baby?" He set the plates down and looked at her with clear, observant eyes. His genuine concern filled her with warmth, which she used to calm her racing heart. Once again his presence centered her.

"Lucas, I need to tell you something." She drew a deep breath and forbade herself to tremble. He looked at her patiently, waiting for her to say her peace.

"I love you," she whispered hastily.

He exhaled a long sigh of relief. "Damn, you scared me to death there for a minute. By the look on your face I was expecting bad news." He gathered her in his arms pressing her cheek to his chest stroking her hair. "I love you, too." She gloried in the shared moment.

"I don't know how we are going to work through our problems with the Council or our different living situations, but I'm confident we can find some happy medium for everyone." She turned and pressed her lips to his nipple.

"We'll figure something out, darling. Now sit and eat before it gets cold." She eagerly bounced over to the table to check out his handiwork. "Since you keep making a habit of scaring the crap out me, I think it's high time I punished you." His sexy drawl hardened her nipples as she turned back to him.

"Punishment? What kind of punishment?" she teased.

"Hurry up and eat and I'll show you." He sat across from her with a grin a mile wide. "I can't wait to spank that fine ass."

Epilogue

Lucas stood on the deck with Kane, watching Malcolm approach the house, backpack slung over his shoulder.

“You leaving now?” He and Kane had been working their way to goodbye as Kira made last minute decisions on what to pack for California.

“The sooner the better, I think.” Lucas regretted the separation between him and his brother, and didn’t relish leaving Kane alone to protect the Dragon. It was a lot of pressure to put on all of them, let alone only one.

“I still can’t believe the Council decreed you and Kira have to leave the Dragon.” Malcolm’s voice held a note of resignation.

Kane shook his head. “This place has been the heart and soul for Lucas since he was a cub. We need him here.”

“I’m not the only one.” Lucas looked between both brothers then and the pain he felt was mirrored in their gazes as well.

“We’ll be back. The Council promised to study all of the ancient mating laws over the next twelve months and then schedule an appeal for us at that time.”

“I still say it’s bullshit.” Kane’s angry outburst troubled Lucas, but this time there wasn’t a damn thing he could do to help.

“It will all depend on how you focus your combined powers during that time. It’s just a test, which I have no doubt you will both pass.”

“What about you, Mal, what will you do? The Council was really pissed about your part in this whole mess. You keep managing to find the worst kind of trouble.”

“Damn it, Lucas, I really thought I was dying. Being unable to shift caused unbearable physical pain. I lived with it for a very long time, but after a while it began to drive me crazy.”

“Well, now you have your abilities back and you can go back to your carefree lifestyle.” Malcolm visibly winced at Kane’s obvious insult.

“You’re right, little brother, I only care about myself. Always have and always will.” Turning on his heel, he stalked back into the woods and out of their life.

Lucas looked over at Kane. “If it wasn’t for him, Kira would be dead. No matter what he has done, I will never forget that.”

“I wish I could leave, too. In fact I want nothing more than to hop on my Harley and ride out of the Dragon right along with you. It’s what the council deserves.”

“You can’t. Everyone is counting on you now.” Lucas knew Kane’s sense of right and wrong was so deeply ingrained he would stay and serve as the last Guardian of his family line. Push come to shove, any of them would.

“Have you given any thought to the Council’s warning? The urgency in them expecting you to find a mate and start a family?” Guardianship could only be passed on through family blood lines and in order to do that, Kane would have to father a child.

“Yeah, right. First I need to get laid.”

Lucas laughed out loud at the screwed up look of frustration on his brother’s face. “Since when do you have problems in that department?”

He hesitated. “Boredom, I guess. Most of the damn she-cats I’ve been fucking are hell bent on something serious and I don’t have any interest.”

Not since she had touched me. Her vivid violet eyes had seared straight to my soul.

“I heard that, Kane. You’ve met someone.” It wasn’t so much of a question as it was a statement. He could hear his brother arguing with himself, yearning to take the woman who occupied his thoughts.

“Get out of my head.”

“Then tell me.”

“I don’t want to think about it. It’s way wrong and I’ll fight it.” Kane shook his head and looked away but it was too late.

“Please tell me you aren’t serious.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely not! If I ever see her again, I’m more likely to kill her than bed her. Let alone mate her.”

A roar tore from his throat, piercing the night as he pushed Lucas out of his head and walked into the woods. It wasn’t easy to see him in such anguish.

God help him if he runs across her again.

Enjoy this sneak preview of

KANE

Book Two: A Black Cougar Novel
BY ELIZA GAYLE

Chapter One

Kane opened the door to a wave of thick white smoke, stale grease, and Ted Nugent warbling from an ancient jukebox in the corner. He stood just inside the door and let his eyes adjust to the atmosphere. Even with his enhanced vision it still took a second to get used to the haze and dim interior of the bar. Although he used the term *bar* loosely.

It technically qualified because of the long serving bar along the back wall, with the various tequilas, vodkas, and Scotches filling the shelves behind it. But the layer of grime and stench in this place would only draw drunks and skanks of which were plentiful in this town, from what he'd seen so far. He crossed the room and took the only available stool at the bar. He lifted his hand to the bartender who eventually ambled over.

"What can I get ya?"

"Scotch neat." He figured it would be the safest thing to order in a place like this.

Hell, when did I become such a snob?

While he waited for his drink he looked into the mirror on the wall behind the liquor to observe the men who were lined up at the bar on either side of him. Men of various ages in different degrees of grubby wear, but no one who really stood out. He tried to catch the gaze of each and every one of them, looking for one who might be willing to talk to him.

The bartender returned and slid a drink in front of him. "Anything else I can get ya? You want a menu?"

"No thanks, I'm just here waiting on someone." That nugget of information seemed to perk up the man's attention. His eyes glinted in the dim light and his head tilted toward Kane in apparent curiosity.

"Who you waitin' for? I know just 'bout everyone who comes in here."

“I’m waiting for a woman.”

The bartender snorted before his face split into a big grin, revealing broken and yellowed teeth. He imagined the fights that broke out in this kind of place would eventually lead to a man’s teeth being damaged and more.

“Not a lot of women come in here.”

“Oh yeah, why’s that?” The guy’s smirk aggravated him. Either that or this hunt was beginning to wear thin.

“Not a lot of women come in here on a count of Twin Peaks next door. They either go over there to pick up the men getting horny watching the girls dance or they don’t come within five miles of the place because they don’t want to be caught dead near a titty bar.”

Kane laughed at the statement he understood all too well. He’d spent his fair share of time in those bars and more. He’d even let his brother Malcolm drag him to a few fetish clubs when they were younger. But some of those clubs would be considered high class compared to this one; so yes, he could well imagine not a lot of women wanting to come near the place.

“I get your point.” He took a swallow of his drink and allowed the slow burn in his throat and belly to comfort him. The liquor wasn’t quite as smooth as he liked it but he couldn’t complain, it would get the job done.

“So this girl of yours, she got a name?”

“Yeah, she does. It’s Lara. I haven’t seen her in a few weeks, and I’m looking forward to catching up.”

The bartender winked knowingly at him. He had no idea. Kane wanted to find her so he could kill her and go back home, maybe then he could get her out of his head. Plus it was never good for a guardian to stay gone so long. If word got out that the clan wasn’t as protected it could leave them open to attack or at the very least harassment from neighboring clans.

Before he could continue his conversation with the idiot behind the bar a man stumbled through the door, yanking Kane’s attention in that direction. He was obviously drunk off his ass, but it wasn’t his state of inebriation that had Kane on edge, it was his scent. The man reeked all the way across the room and the smell had Kane seeing red as he gripped the wooden edge of the bar to keep himself from ripping out the stranger’s throat.

He was covered in the woman's scent.

Lara.

A low growl rumbled in his throat and the bartender shot him a questioning glance. Kane turned away from the door and ground his teeth to hold in the anger. Fur rippled along his skin and his fingers underneath the lip of the bar edge partially shifted to paws and claws as he scraped into the wood.

Kane caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and willed his body to calm. Shifting out in the open was strictly forbidden and could heap a helluva lot of trouble on him and his kind that they couldn't afford to deal with right now. Not with both of the other guardians shunned from the clan. He sighed. He missed his brothers and it frustrated the fuck out of him that they were both gone. Especially Lucas. Being shunned for mating with a non-shifter just didn't seem right. She carried his mark, for Christ's sake. Sometimes who you end up with can't always be controlled. *Yeah, keep telling yourself that.*

Another glance in the mirror showed a man not as close to the edge as a few minutes ago. He breathed in deep, letting his lungs fill before slowly releasing the air. He no longer scratched at the bar with claws and he raised his hand to wipe the sweat that had broken out on his forehead.

He should be happy that someone in the bar carried her scent, it meant he was getting closer. About fucking time. But the rage, where the hell was that coming from?

The man seated next to him threw some bills on the bar and walked out, leaving an open stool that the new drunk guy immediately opted to occupy. Kane's groin tightened with the onslaught of Lara's scent and for once he wished he didn't have heightened senses. His cock swelled against his thigh and thoughts of her were even more vivid than they had been in his dreams over the past nights. He had come to dread the time he had to sleep because he always dreamt of her.

Not as the vicious bitch he knew her to be. Oh, no. In his dreams Lara was a lush, naked temptress that he ached to get his hands on. He thought about licking each and every sweet inch of her night after night.

"Bartender, bring me a drink. Something strrrrong." The man slurred his words as he ordered but it brought him back to

the present. It was the man sitting next to him, a stranger, not the woman.

He had a job to do and it appeared his luck had finally turned. He had a lead on finding her in the form of a young and stupid drunk.

Kane took another swallow of his drink and grimaced this time over the burn. He would sit here and finish his shitty Scotch and wait. Either this man would start talking or Kane would make him talk when he left the building. He struggled not to groan when some Creedence Clearwater poured from the dusty old juke in the corner.

Could this place be more stereotypical if it tried? He didn't think so.

When the bartender laid down a shot of tequila in front of the man, he picked it up and turned to Kane. "Here's to good alcohol and hot women."

At the man's words, Kane felt an honest to God tick in his eye and an overwhelming urge to smash his glass into the man's face and wrestle him down to the ground. Somehow he resisted.

"Here, here." He raised his glass in a mock toast. After they had both taken several more drinks he opted to move in. "Have a good night with a good woman then?"

"Hell yeah, I did. Fine piece of ass if I do say so myself." Kane had to bite his tongue as hatred for this man burned through his veins. He had asked for it so the least he could do is play along.

"Lucky man. I'm waiting on my girl now. Your girl got a name?"

The man hesitated with the rim of the glass perched on his bottom lip. His eyes were bloodshot as hell and glazed over to the point he wondered how the man could see in front of his face.

"Yeah—uhm—" He hesitated after every word.

"She does or she doesn't?"

"Well, I'm sure she does, but for the life of me I can't remember what it was." He snorted as he pelted down the last of his tequila. His face screwed up at the taste and Kane wondered for a moment if he was going to throw up. Either way he was prepared to move fast.

“Well, bud, I’m not sure whether that’s good or bad. Guess it depends on if you want to see her again. A woman doesn’t like a man who can’t remember her name.” Kane swallowed his own urge to vomit at this lowlife who sure as hell didn’t deserve to even breathe the same air as Lara let alone fuck her.

Whoa, where the hell did that come from?

His words must have hit home as the man turned away from him and called after the bartender again. He even turned to his other side and struck up a conversation with the man sitting there. Damn it!

This wasn’t going to work. He obviously couldn’t play nice and the longer he sat there the stronger the urge became to kill him and put him out of everyone’s misery.

Kane threw down some bills and headed to the parking lot. He could either wait outside and take care of things the old-fashioned way or go next door and wait in the strip club. Either way he was out of there.

* * * *

Kane paced along the tree line that surrounded most of the bar parking lot. Two hours had passed and the little shit had yet to come outside. He had leaned against the building wishing for a cigarette, sat in his Jeep listening to some rock music, and when he finally tired of doing nothing he hit the edge of the woods and shifted. The brush was dense and the parking lot not all that well lit, so it was easy for him to hide without losing sight of the entrance doors to both clubs.

More than once he’d considered the *other* club. He could slip in, find a nice girl to take him home, and maybe then he would finally stop having all those fucked up thoughts about a woman with a death wish. Strippers were usually a lot of fun, always willing to try new things. Not so uptight like most of the feline bitches in his clan.

A couple of times the door of the club had opened and he’d gotten a glimpse of naked flesh wrapped around a silver pole, long dark hair that brushed the ground with every dip, and long long legs that seemed to go on and on. He shook his muzzle. Yeah, he needed an outlet real bad.

A run would help, it wasn't as if this idiot would be hard to track later. But he wanted to talk to him now, while her scent was fresh. Kane would give him another ten minutes and then he was going in. He took a few more minutes to enjoy the cool grass underneath his paws, he even scratched at the tree, stretching his legs and sharpening his already lethally sharp claws.

He envisioned being back in human form and he thought of Lara. His body shifted from cougar to human and he looked at himself. It irked him to see his arousal jutting out from his hips. He couldn't understand how thoughts of the woman he'd been sent to kill could make him harder than he'd ever experienced in his life. It wasn't right to want to fuck the woman who'd been trying to kill his brother for weeks. The day Lucas had left the clan he'd received orders to hunt her down and eliminate her. The council didn't like the idea of a witch on the loose who was not only willing and able to use black magic, but had made several attempts on the Guardians. An offense punishable by death.

Yet every time he closed his eyes he saw images of her. He couldn't deny she was a beautiful woman, even with the constant scowl she had on her face when looking at him or his brothers. But the eyes, well, they haunted him day and night. She may have been a tough bitch, but if the eyes are supposed to be the windows to the soul, then she hid far more about her than what she allowed on the surface.

He'd seen flashes of anger, distrust, and pain, but there had been even more if he wasn't mistaken, and his instincts usually weren't. She hated them and he wanted an answer to that. Hatred like he'd seen didn't come from nowhere. There was a lot more to her story and he planned to get to it sooner or later. Once he captured her, the council could afford to wait a few days for him to carry out her sentence. He would have his answers first.

He crossed over to the rock he'd stowed his clothes behind and donned his jeans, button-down shirt, and shit kickers. His patience had run out and it was time to go inside and drag the little fucker outside. He stalked across the parking lot once again and the door popped open, and the man Kane had been waiting for stumbled out. If he'd thought the man was drunk a couple of

hours ago he was positively loaded now.

This wasn't going to be any fun. While he'd been spoiling for a fight, the stumbling, bleary-eyed man could barely walk let alone take him on. Still, when Lara's scent overpowered the reek of alcohol and sweat, rage bubbled in his blood. This man had done more than just touch her, and for that he should die. She was his.

Fuck! He couldn't keep having stray thoughts like that. It wasn't right. She was a dead woman.

But first...

He grabbed the man by the collar of his shirt and threw him back against the building like a rag doll. The sound of his body crashing might have been loud, but Kane heard nothing beyond the blood rushing in his head. He let out a cry before pouncing against the guy pinning him to the wall.

"What the—" The man's eyes widened to huge orbs in his face. Shock glared from his face.

"Tell me about her."

"Her? Her who? What the hell?"

Kane shoved his arm across the man's throat and applied hard pressure against his windpipe, cutting off his air supply. "Do not fuck with me. Not if you want to wake up tomorrow to your pitiful existence in this shit hole town."

Hands frantically clawed at his forearm as the man struggled for breath, but Kane couldn't be budged. It would be so easy, even in human form, to just kill him. Precious seconds ticked by and he removed his arm, the man falling unconscious to the ground at his feet.

He grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and dragged him to the woods. This conversation would be best had in private and he didn't want to have to take care of someone else who might exit the bar at a really bad time.

He didn't have to walk far before he found a small clearing that even had some light from the near full moon above. He shook the man awake and had to restrain himself from laughing out loud at the fear written all over his face. Served the bastard right.

He took a few steps away. "Don't even think about running. You could never move faster than me and you'll just piss me off

even more.”

“What do you want from me? I don’t have any money.”

Kane released a sigh of frustration. “Focus, you idiot. This is not me robbing you. The girl. I want to know everything about the girl.”

“What girl?”

Kane crossed back to the man in one big stride and slammed his fist into his face. The man cried out and stumbled back a few feet. His hand cradled his face as drops of blood ran from his nose.

“The girl whose scent is all over you. What do you know about her?”

The man hesitated. He was probably afraid to say the wrong thing.

“You mean the hot chick I met at Junior’s earlier this evening?”

Kane glared, waiting for the man to go on.

“Why didn’t you just say so, dude? I’m more than happy to pass on her information. She was all over me earlier tonight.” When Kane made a move again towards him he raised his hands in resistance. “Whoa, hold on. It was the dance floor. We just danced. She your old lady or something?”

“Or something.”

“Well, you might want to have a chat with her, ’cause she was all over every man there. Flirting and rubbing up against them. Hard to resist such a fine, fine woman, you know?”

Kane wondered if this idiot had any brain cells at all. It should have been obvious to anyone by now that he was holding onto control by a thread, yet the asshole kept babbling on about Lara in a way that incited him.

“Where is she?”

“I don’t know. Last time I saw her was over at Junior’s before he kicked me out. Stupid bastard, I wasn’t even doing anything.

“Yeah, I just bet you weren’t. Did she say anything at all to you?

“Just that she wanted to fu—” The man’s few smarts must have finally kicked in or maybe the warning snarl that had escaped Kane’s mouth unbidden woke him up.

“What else?”

“That’s it. Really she wanted me to meet her at the Happy Hills Motel for some uhm—further discussion.”

“Yeah, I’ll just bet she did.”

Luckily Kane already knew where the motel was. It sat just a few miles outside the center of town secluded in the woods except for the blinking sign out on the roadside. *Perfect.*

“Leave.”

The man stood frozen to the spot looking confused.

“Leave now or die here.” Kane’s words finally sank in when the man shuffled past him and headed for the parking lot. Kane waited until he heard a car screeching before he dug into his jeans and pulled out his keys.

He had a bitch to corral.

About the Author

From the moment Eliza read her first erotic romance novel several years ago, she knew she had found her niche and realized that her dream was passing her by. So after years of thinking about it she finally grabbed her laptop and wrote. These days she likes her stories hot and spicy whether they be contemporary, fantasy or paranormal and will write in whatever genre her imagination has conjured that day.

Eliza lives in beautiful North Carolina and spends her days dividing her time between writing erotic romance, her full-time job as a marketing manager and raising her two daughters.