

Del Fantasma

Tiger Juice

Melisse Aires



Aspen Mountain Press

Del Fantasma: Tiger Juice

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Widow Letha flees a repressive religious community on the northern prairies, where she lived under the suspicion of having demon blood. Her journey ends in Point Loma, CA, at the Del Fantasma. Perhaps working for vampire Cody in a paranormal friendly bar will give her some answers about her psychic abilities.

Jagger comes from a tight knit clan of white tiger shifters, but he left the family entertainment business to run a contracting business. He hangs out at his friend Cody's bar.

When the Storm of the Century approaches Point Loma, Cody works his magic.

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Chapter One

Letha pulled her truck into a parking lot by the Point Loma State Park beach.

No doubt about it, she was about as far from Gruber, North Dakota, as she could be. If she went much farther west, she'd be in the Pacific, and much farther south, she'd be in Mexico.

Something about the town appealed to her. It was so different from the wheat fields and prairies of North Dakota.

Letha wanted different, she wanted change. Her life at the Covenant Farm, her beliefs as a Covenant member... all that was over, dropping away as the old truck traversed the miles. This was her new life, and this looked like the place to start living it.

During the journey from North Dakota her thoughts had been filled with her mother, gone since the summer Letha turned twelve, and Ben, the sweet, gentle boy she'd married at age sixteen, both because she loved him and because marriage offered both of them a measure of freedom they could not have as unmarried adults at Covenant. Ben, always frail with a heart condition, had drifted away from life three years ago leaving her very much alone.

When she realized her small town, all members of the same church, would shun her for refusing to obey her Uncle Zachary and the Pastor and marry a man she didn't know or love, years of dissatisfaction and rebellion welled up. The price for their approval was too high. Her marriage to Ben had been sweet and full of love; marriage to this strange, dour man would be a prison.

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She packed her bags in the dead of night, gathered the small stash of cash she'd hidden away over the years, and left Gruber while Uncle Zachary and Aunt Hannah were sound asleep. She drove straight to Ben's grave in a small cemetery on a deserted county road.

"I have to go now, Ben. I don't know where yet, but somewhere far away from here. I wish we could have gone together, and I hope you will watch over me." Once, she and Ben had dreamed of moving away but his fragile health had stopped them. "I won't marry a man I don't love, or who doesn't love me. I know that could never be right. Uncle Zach and the Pastor are wrong, and they won't listen to me; so I have to go to the Outside and make a life."

Letha hopped out of the truck and walked down to the water. She felt that people were staring at her in her long sleeved, calf length calico dress. She'd had little money to spare for Outsider clothes, so her Covenant wear would have to do until she could buy something else.

At the water's edge she sat and pulled off her sneakers and socks. The water was cold. She smiled and almost squealed when the water first touched her skin. Letha loved the way it ebbed and flowed over her feet, as if it was alive.

The sunset over the ocean was glorious. Letha stayed until full dark and then walked slowly back to her truck where she planned to eat a peanut butter sandwich, find a truck stop, pay for a shower, and sleep in the cab of the truck. Her money was almost gone, so tomorrow she'd have to look for a job.

As she walked up the slight incline to the parking lot she overheard a group of young men in rubber suits, carrying surfboards. "I heard the Del Fantasma is hiring. Maybe I'll check it out."

"Yeah, like he's gonna let you off to surf. You need a throwaway job, like Mickey D's," one of the other surfer boys said.

"Yeah, maybe you're right. It's a night job, though. Good hours. And good

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tips, too, at the Del.”

A night job, Letha thought as she drove on the interstate to a truck stop. That might be a good thing. She could sleep during the day, down by the beach. Surely that would be a lot safer than sleeping at a truck stop at night.

Tomorrow she’d check out the restaurant with the fancy Spanish name.

* * * *

Eight o’clock at night seemed like an odd time for a job interview, but Letha figured it was normal for a restaurant and bar. She pulled into the parking lot and took a moment to calm herself.

She’d solved her clothing crisis, somewhat, with a couple pairs of black pants from a second hand store. At the beach she’d cut up the long Covenant dresses so she could tuck them in like a shirt. It still wasn’t like what other people wore, but it was closer than the long dress. She’d taken her hair down, too. Instead of the bun that marked her at the Covenant as a married or widowed woman, she now wore a braid that fell down her back to her waist.

The Del Fantasma was Spanish style adobe building, like many around here. She liked the clean colors of adobe and the red tiled roofs. The windows were heavily shuttered, and the exterior was well kept with just a little landscaping. It looked like a nice place to eat.

Letha walked in to the Del Fantasma and blinked, then blinked again. She was seeing with the Demon Sight – and she wasn’t even trying! Auras, pulsing with color, assaulted her inner eye.

She whirled around and rushed back outside, heart pounding. Everything looked normal.

That building, it is bringing out the demon in me!

Letha shook that thought off. She was like her mother, and she didn’t care what anyone said, her mom had not been evil! While she hesitated, calming her pounding heart, she thought of the thirty dollars in her backpack, and the

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truck stop last night. She had looked around the town for a job today, but few places were hiring. She needed a job, desperately, and she needed to stay here in Point Loma, because for some reason, she felt like she needed to. Taking a deep breath, she walked back into the dark building.

A young man with a bright aura was at the bar. "Can I help you?"

"I have a job interview with Cody Warren." She refused to look around at all; one aura was enough to deal with.

"Right. I'll tell him you're here."

Soon he returned and she followed him behind the bar to a small office.

"Here she is, boss," her escort said, and returned to the bar.

Letha entered a small office where a large, dark haired man sat behind the desk. His aura was odd, pulsing black and red. *Black and red – what did that mean?* Normal auras were green and yellow and blue – out of the corner of her eye she saw glowing orbs near him.

The spirits of the dead! She gasped and froze, unable to keep her eyes off them.

The man looked at her but she couldn't move. He stood, then came around his desk to lead her to a small sofa. "It's alright. Really it is. Nothing will hurt you here."

"Spirits! Th-this place is h-haunted," she finally was able to speak. The orbs were still around, them, not evaporating like normal spirit orbs.

"You have the Sight," the man said. "Yes. The Del Fantasma is a haven, of sorts, for those who are different. Like you and me. The ghosts will not hurt you. Whatever their reasons for taking refuge here, they are not here to harm." His blue eyes seemed to look right through her.

"I'm Cody Warren," he said "I own the Del Fantasma. You must be Letha Reicher."

"Yes."

"The clientele here are not evil, but many are more than they seem. Not evil, but different. This is one of the few safe places in the world for para

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people.”

She glanced up at him, and saw fangs. Vampire! She knew the world was full of Others, non-humans. Covenant called them demons, but Letha wondered...

Cody’s eyes were kind.

She swallowed. “I’m different,” she acknowledged.

Cody nodded. “I see that. Do you know what you are?”

DEMON! screamed through her mind, in Uncle Zachary’s voice. “No.”

“Perhaps by working here you will learn more about yourself.”

Would that be good? I’m already hell-bound by Covenant standards, what does it matter if I work for a vampire?

She took a deep breath to compose herself. At least he wasn’t screaming at her. That already made him better than her last employer. “Um...I’ve waitressed for years. We had a restaurant with home style farm food in Gruber.”

He grinned. “Not too much home style food here, but what we have is good. Lots of seafood and Mexican. You get one free meal per shift. No drinking on the job unless I offer.”

Her eyes grew round. She’d never had an alcoholic drink in her entire twenty four years,

“You want to give the job a try?” Cody asked.

She nodded. She didn’t think Cody was evil...and since long before leaving Covenant she’d been thinking that she wasn’t really evil, either. She didn’t want to hurt anyone. Her mother had been kind and loving. In her heart she knew she wasn’t evil.

“I can’t give you references. They’ve shunned me. But I was a good waitress.”

“I believe you. You’re hired.”

Chapter Two

Letha began work immediately, and even as the new girl in odd clothing, her tips were pretty good. And she felt safer sleeping during the day, parked at the beach.

The auras were always visible to her inside the Del Fantasma, and so different from the ordinary green and blue human auras she'd seen in the past. She soon was able to recognize a shifter aura, or a vampire aura. The spirit orbs did not return, perhaps they stayed in Cody's office. While the patrons were not all human, they seemed to act like ordinary people in the restaurant. Cody and his staff did not allow fights or preying on others, and Cody often quit serving drinks to those that got drunk and found them a ride home. Plus the meals were delicious. Many people came for the seafood.

The rest of the staff was a mix of human and not quite human. Letha didn't like to ask, but she kept her ears open and learned a few things. She knew there was a group of middle aged witches who came in and sat at a back table a couple nights a week. They made her a little nervous, though they tipped well and were always friendly. She doubted any of them had made a pact with the Devil.

One of the waitresses was a daywalker, which was kind of like a vampire, and one was Wiccan, which seemed to be some type of witch, but both were really nice and helped bus her tables all the time. Living so isolated on the Covenant farm for so long, Letha was astonished at how much kinder people—even those not quite human—were than she'd been led to believe they'd be;

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especially when she compared them to the sour, judgmental people at Covenant. She tried to keep her ignorance of Outsider life to herself and didn't speak about her past. She tried to fit in.

Witches. Vampires. Shifters...these were evil the Pastor told of back home. Yet, everyone treated her so well.

* * * *

Jagger glided into his regular place, a small corner table where he could watch the doorway and see most of the Del Fantasma. It wasn't that the bar wasn't a safe place; he was just uncomfortable being in a position where he could observe the action around him.

His waitress was new, and not at all the type Cody normally hired. Her dark hair was scraped back into a tight braid and she wore an ugly blue blouse buttoned up to her Adam's apple. Most of the waitresses dressed casual, but sexy, probably to get better tips. He wasn't used to seeing an attractive woman – and the waitress was very attractive, with full pink lips and light blue eyes framed in dark thick lashes, and a rounded figure – under her baggy clothes.

He ordered a draft beer and a steak. "Tell them it's for Jagger, they know how I like it cooked."

She was obviously experienced as a waitress, he observed as she efficiently set his sizzling rare steak before him. She cleared his empty plate away at a timely moment and got him a refill of beer without having to be summoned, which meant she kept an eye on her tables. Jagger appreciated the good service.

"What's your name?" He asked when she brought back his frosted mug of beer. Now that the steak was out of the way and she leaned close to put his beer down, he noticed certain nuances in her scent. Interesting. Not a shifter scent he recognized, but not quite human either.

Her face flooded pink at his question. "Letha."

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"Nice to meet you. I'm Jagger Kirellov." He handed her the money for his bill. "Keep the change."

She thanked him before she left his table. Her voice was soft but had a resonate quality that was pleasant to his sensitive hearing.

Later, as he was leaving, he leaned on the bar to chat with Cody. "New waitress?"

"Yup." Cody swiftly mixed a few drinks.

"What is she?"

Cody paused and looked up. He grinned. "I don't know. I don't think she knows, either. Something para."

"Unusual scent."

"It's not the only thing unusual about her."

"Yeah?"

Cody nodded his head. "Definitely para, but doesn't know anything. Comes from some super conservative farming community in North Dakota. A widow."

"Unusual for the Del Fantasma."

"Yeah, think she wanted a change."

"She got that, all right."

Cody set another beer down in front of him. "On the house. So how's work? Keeping busy?"

"Yeah. Restoring a 1920's mansion, lots of work involved."

"How's your grandmother? Still matchmaking?"

Jagger sighed. "Yeah. She thinks she found a live one, and she wants me to fly to Italy in July to meet her."

"You gonna do it?"

Jagger shrugged. "I guess. It's probably time I married and added to the clan line."

"Don't sound so thrilled." Cody laughed.

Jagger grinned. "Maybe I'll be more enthusiastic after I meet the girl. But if

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she appeals to Grandma....” He shuddered.

The waitress, Letha, intrigued him, so Jagger would make it a point to sit in her section whenever he visited the Del Fantasma. Sometime he’d have to bring Aunt Sal here. She was good at discerning paras.

* * * *

Many of the men who came to the Del Fantasma at night were very handsome, Letha noticed. She shared that observation one day with Tara, a singer in the bar who was becoming a friend.

“Vampires do tend to be good looking,” Tara explained. “Paras think it is a survival factor, the good looking ones have an easier time hunting blood—they can charm people into giving blood and avoid a lot of danger and unpleasantness. And shifters all have that animal grace.” Tara caught the eyes of her man—a shifter named Brandon—and winked at him.

“I don’t know if I would be brave enough to...get involved with a para.” When a man smiled at Letha and tried to get her to stay at his table for a moment and chat, she got nervous. Cody, Tara, and the rest of the staff seemed to steer the more aggressive ones away, for which she was grateful. She’d escaped an arranged marriage to a mean old man; she didn’t want to get involved with a vampire or something weird!

Tara gave her a little hug. “You’ve been through many changes. No need to rush into anything. You’ll know when the time is right.”

“You think I will?”

“Yes. You’ll know because you’ll be more intrigued than nervous. And you’ll see beyond the charming smile to the man beneath.”

Goldie, a blond waitress with a strong South American accent, came up to her at the beginning of her shift the next day.

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“Hey, Letha. I got some clothes from my sister. You wan’ them? She went to a spa and her husband say if she lose twenty pounds he buy her all new clothes. Now she is skinny, really skinny.”

“You don’t want them for yourself?” Letha was astonished at the offer—she’d been wondering if she should spend some of her apartment savings on clothes.

“Nah, she tall like you. Me, I hate hemming, so no way I want them.” Goldie was a tiny girl.

Tara was nearby. “How wonderful! We need a fashion show.”

“I’m on the clock,” Letha protested.

“I’ll take care of it,” Tara headed off to Cody’s office. A moment later Cody came out, and grinned right at her.

“Karma. You deserve nice things.”

So she did a fashion show for the waitresses and Cody, with Goldie acting as her dresser.

“These are gorgeous,” Letha said. She’d done enough sewing to be able to recognize fine workmanship.

“Expensive boutiques. My sister, she is married to a plastic surgeon. Tons of money—Really! Tons! And Cody must be right about the karma, even the bras fit like they were made for you,” Goldie said.

An hour later, Letha was wearing a new outfit for work, a white gauzy top over a blue lace camisole and pale blue capris. On her feet were delicate white leather sandals. She looked so different. And her figure looked much different with the pink bra. She’d only worn sports bras before. She was a little shocked at the difference in her figure.

Tara had insisted in putting her hair up in a high pony tail. “You are going to pull in the tips tonight, and Cody will be busy keeping the men away!”

Her tips were better. She was pretty happy about that, though some of the looks she got made her feel self-conscious.

Jagger Kirillov sat at one of her small tables. She knew he was some type

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of shifter. Probably a cat from the smooth grace of his movements—the staff thought. All the single waitresses thought he was hot, with collar-length ash blond hair, strong cheekbones, pale, sky blue eyes and full lips. He was tall and lean, with broad shoulders. One of the waitresses told her he owned a big construction company and hired a lot of paras.

She brought him his favorite beer an iced mug.

“You look different tonight,” he said.

Heat rushed to her face. “I got new clothes. And Tara did my hair.”

“You look nice.”

As compliments went, it wasn’t the most extravagant one she heard through the evening, but for some reason it meant more than the others. There was something about Jagger that stood out to her. Maybe it was because there was never a hint of disrespect or condensation in the way her treated her or other staff members.

And if she was honest, he was so attractive she wanted to look at him all the time.

I have a crush, she acknowledged. In a way that made her sad, because she had grieved for so long and it was hard to let Ben go. But she knew Ben would want her to move on, to find happiness.

Chapter Three

The more time Letha spent with the paranormal crowd, the more she saw they weren't any different than the humans she knew. Some were dangerous, but then humans could be dangerous too. She began to feel lighter at heart than since Ben died four years ago. Ben, who she married at sixteen, wouldn't have wanted her to be sad. He'd been a cheerful, fun boy and a smiling, gentle husband. They had lived in their own little world, while the Covenant had moved on around them.

Ben's death had changed that. Without a husband, the Pastor became her 'head' as they termed it in Covenant theology. And Pastor decided she was in danger of causing 'division' in the community because she was a young widow—even though she had no interest in being courted by anyone. Finally, he decided she needed to marry an older widower in the community, since there was no one else willing to take her on.

She'd been forced to flee in Ben's old truck as the community turned ugly when she refused to remarry....She was so glad that Ben had hidden money away over the years.

Life was better, out here in the world.

While she was finishing her tables at closing Cody called her over to the bar. "Have a seat."

She swallowed hard and climbed up on a tall stool. Was she in trouble?

"It has come to my attention, young lady, that you are sleeping in your

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truck.”

She felt heat flood her cheeks. “Well, I...um...couldn’t afford a place right away, but I’ve been saving my money so I can get one soon.”

“Have you heard the weather report?”

“No.”

“Bad storm coming. You can have the couch in my office until you can find a real place. It’s just too dangerous to stay in your truck, especially with the storm that’s heading our way.”

She hesitated.

“I won’t take no for an answer.”

He grinned but his eyes were somber.

“All right, boss. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

It was good to feel safe--she hadn’t really felt safe since Ben died, but here she was safe. Even with the spirit orbs flickering in and out. The couch was not quite long enough for her to stretch out on, but it was so much more comfortable than the cab of her truck. There was a small bathroom off Cody’s office, with a shower stall. Such luxury! She showered and put on a pair of pajamas from her collection of new clothing. The top was a pale pink, thin knit, sleeveless, with a gathered yoke, that came with a matching pair of tiny shorts. The set was decorated with floral embroidery and tiny ribbons in yellow, and was stretchy and comfortable. She sighed with delight as she crawled into her sleeping bag on the couch.

Cody had an apartment in the basement, but Jonathan, who lived in the upstairs apartment, was on vacation, so it was very quiet after closing. The two orbs she often saw around Cody’s office were present, but she no longer feared them, though sometimes she wondered why they stayed here. Their glow was gentle, almost peaceful; like the sound of raindrops was peaceful.

A loud banging woke her from a deep sleep. She looked around,

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disoriented and saw the clock on the wall. Five am. It was dark for five am.

Another bang. She leaped off the couch and ran into the bar.

Thunder and lightning crashed, and the door of the Del Fantasma burst open.

A nude man stood in the doorway as another bolt of lightning blazed, outlining the tall lithe form and pale silvery hair. Then, in the man's place stood a tiger, white, with dark stripes, and he was enormous.

Letha screamed in shock, whirled around, and tore off for the office.

There as a soft thud behind her, then a paw, white, with long claws, fell heavy on her shoulder, and she fell to the floor. The paw gently rolled her over as if she weighed nothing.

The white tiger with sky blue eyes stood over her, one paw still on her shoulder. Then the shape blurred, and a man crouched over her.

Jagger Kirillov.

"Don't. Ever. Run. From. A. Tiger." His voice was harsh.

She tried to catch her breath. "A-all right." She couldn't look away from his sky blue eyes. The heat of his naked flesh, held just inches from her thin knit pajama top burned against her breasts. As she took a deep breath, the tips of her breasts grazed his chest.

He made a sound—something between a growl and a purr—that resonated all the way through her. Then his lips pressed against hers, hard and demanding. She gasped in a mix of shock and delight, and his tongue plunged in, while at the same time he lowered his hard hot body on top of hers. Letha could feel the hard length of his erection pressing against her. Wildness flared inside her and she threw her arms around his neck, giving back the kiss with a passion she didn't even know she had, while his arms pulled her tighter.

Thunder shook them. Jagger pulled away, and Letha became aware that the door was still open letting rain drive indoors.

He rose, pulling her up with him.

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"A noise woke me." She filled the silence with the first thing she could think of.

He nodded, but his eyes were roving her figure.

Oh my god, I'm barely dressed.

He lifted a strand of hair from her shoulder. His hand brushing against her neck sent a shiver of desire to her center. Under the thin sleep shirt her nipples puckered.

"You should wear your hair down. It is so pretty." He let her go. "I have a crew coming to sandbag the Del Fantasma in about thirty minutes. You should get dressed." He walked to the door, giving a view of his round muscular buttocks and sculpted back. At the door Jagger paused and looked back at her over his shoulder, the dim morning light emphasizing the purity of his profile and length of his dark lashes. "Unless you want to play."

His eyes flickered and she instinctively looked lower. His sex was hard and thick, jutting straight out, longer than she thought a man could be. With a gasp she fled to the office.

Letha scrambled into cute flared jeans and a pale yellow t-shirt as fast as she could, hands still shaking from the shock of kissing Jagger Kirillov. She'd kissed a shifter—a naked one! And she'd liked it...so much. Her whole body still tingled.

Demon lust. The Pastor's accusing voice rung through her head. She could still hear him using lust as his reason of why she had to marry a man of his choosing. She tried to ignore the memory, but it still bothered her. Pastor was wrong about her, and they'd all been wrong about her mother. *It's not evil to desire a man.* But her thoughts skittered away from the uncomfortable thought that Jagger was more than a man—he was a shifter.

* * * *

Jagger dragged his clothing on, and then proceeded to phone his crew.

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With Jonathan on vacation, Cody had asked him to help out at the Del Fantasma, which he gladly did. Cody had done a lot for the Kirillov clan, and Jagger was happy to have a chance to return a favor.

The woman, Letha...she really got to him. When she was under him, it had been all he could do not to pull off those frilly pink pajamas. He'd noticed her when she only wore the baggy black pants and the ugly high-necked shirts, so it was hard to ignore her in her new clothes. She was shy, though, and he saw Cody and the rest of the staff hedge around her when men acted interested, which was nightly. He should just stay away; she didn't seem like a woman out for just a good time. With his clan responsibilities, that was the only kind of relationship he could have with her.

Letha emerged from the office, wearing a yellow shirt that was low-cut enough to show a glimpse of ivory lace bra and blue jeans that fit her hips and thighs to perfection. *Great.* He'd have to let his crew know she was off limits. He shook his head at that thought. She wasn't his, she wasn't off limits—she just needed to be treated right. And none of the men he had working today had problems respecting women. In fact, most of them were settled family men.

The knowledge that none of them would even think about hitting on Letha gave Jagger a sense of satisfaction he didn't want to examine.

"I'll make coffee for the crew. I could set out some finger foods, too, if you think they'd like a snack."

"That would be great." He looked out the door and into the driving rain. "Here they are now; we're going to get right to work." He left quickly.

Letha pored herself a cup of coffee and doctored it with cream and sugar. Part of her wished the kiss hadn't ended, but had lead to more. If he had...she shook her head to erase her train of thought and got busy. This was not the time for thoughts like that.

She spent part of the morning listening to the TV weather reports. One

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hundred mile an hour winds! Letha had seen damage from winds like that in North Dakota.

Several men came in for coffee after the first hour or so. When Jagger came in, hair wet, her heart revved up. He smiled and talked with several of the men but when he looked her way his face was serious. She wondered if he was thinking about that kiss, too.

To her surprise, Cody walked into the bar from the storage room.

"You're up early."

"Yeah, with this storm coming in I want to be prepared. How'd you sleep?"

"Oh, it was fine. Better than in the truck." She felt her cheeks turn pink but Cody had no way of knowing she'd kissed a naked Jagger.

"Good. Would you mind calling the staff and telling them we won't be opening today? I don't want people trying to drive to work on flooded roads."

"Sure." She was glad to have something to do, and she went to Cody's office to call everyone with the news. While she was there she saw the spirit orbs, almost out of her line of site, but she felt their presence. She perceived that they meant her no harm. Still, she wondered why they were here.

After that task was done she joined Cody in the kitchen.

"The guys are coming in for a late lunch. I'm doing popcorn shrimp, coleslaw, fries and beer. Sound good? Easy enough to prepare." Cody chopped cabbage with lightning speed while he talked.

Letha grinned. Who knew being a vampire was an advantage in the kitchen? "I think it sounds great." She threw on an apron and hairnet and helped him cook. When the weary crew came in she served the shrimp baskets and draft beers.

"Sit down and eat," Cody said when the men were served. "You were a big help. What would you like to drink?"

"Oh, soda will be fine." She sat at the bar, too shy to join the men or Jagger at the bar.

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Cody grinned. “Here, let me fix you next week’s specialty. Sweet and tart.” He mixed a drink and set it in front of her.

Letha eyed it with caution. “It looks like juice.” She’d tried a few drinks and a beer since starting at the Del, but found alcoholic drinks weren’t to her liking. She took a sip. It felt warm in her tummy, even though the drink was on ice, and tasted crisp and fruity—better than some drinks she’d tried. It went well with the food also and soon it was nearly gone, along with the shrimp.

“How do you like it?” Cody asked casually while carrying mugs to refill.

“It’s good, especially with the food.”

“Great. It’s called Tiger Juice.” Cody grinned and walked away.

Chapter Four

Was Cody...matchmaking? Letha had heard the tales about Cody's matchmaking drinks. *Tiger juice. It was just a coincidence, surely. Cody couldn't know.*

The memory of Jagger's nude body in the flash of lightning...she could still see him clearly in her mind. His warm lips on hers...her breasts still felt sensitive.

Lust. And the alcoholic drink. That's what it was... she was a widow who knew about the pleasures of the marriage bed.

But she had never found Ben as stirring as the shifter. Her marriage had brought joy and comfort, but mostly she had loved Ben because of his gentle warmth and humor, so different from the harshness of Uncle Zachary. Passion hadn't been a huge part of her feelings for him, though she had enjoyed his gentle love making and treasured the closeness sexual intimacy brought.

The drink was just a coincidence! Wasn't it?

"You should give me your keys,"

She jumped as Jagger spoke from right behind her.

"What?"

"I'll have my crew move your truck. We can put it in one of our equipment warehouses so it won't get damaged in the storm."

"Really? I'd worried about it sitting out in the storm."

Letha slipped off her stool and got the keys from her bag, and Jagger went

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back out into the rain with some of his crew.

After Jagger left she finished eating, then helped bus the tables while the workers finished their drinks and watched the weather channel on the television about the Storm of the Century. High winds, pounding rains, flash floods, mud slides...it did sound bad. She was glad she wasn't waiting out the storm in her truck.

* * * *

Jagger returned to the Del Fantasma in time to see the last of his crew straggle out into the pounding rain. He checked on all his properties and parked Letha's truck in his nearby equipment garage. After inspecting the work his crew was finishing to keep the Del Fantasma safe, he found Cody at the bar, cleaning. Jagger grinned, amused to see a vampire doing dishes. Cody rolled his eyes at Jagger's grin. "Thanks for your help. I wanted to make sure the bar would come through this storm with as little damage as possible."

"I think it's a necessary precaution. I have all my own seaside buildings sandbagged and the windows covered. Are you staying here during the storm?"

"Yeah. I have some friends coming over, friends with security training. I don't want to be here alone if looters show up." He grimaced. "I'll have to sleep for sure tomorrow."

"Good to have friends." Jagger took a sip of the beer Cody handed him.

"Speaking of that...." Cody turned and glanced briefly at Letha, who was unloading the dishwasher.

Her cheeks were flushed from the steam, and hair had pulled out of her practical braid. Flushed and mussed, like she'd just been in his bed...Jagger started to get hard.

She looked delectable.

"Would you mind taking Letha home with you? One of the guys coming

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over is a young vampire...and uncouth where pretty women are concerned. She'd be just too much temptation, if you know what I mean. I don't want her getting spooked. She'd been through a lot."

The request floored him. Of course, Cody couldn't know about that kiss, about how much he'd wanted to stretch out on top of her and do a lot more than kiss. "You think that's a good idea, her coming with me?"

"Yeah, I do. You might find you have things in common, though it really is a safety issue. Jonah is one wild boy."

This is crazy, Letha thought as she ran through what felt like buckets of icy rainwater and dove into the passenger seat of Jagger's SUV. Jagger leaned across her and grabbed the large trash bag that held her duffle bag of clothes and backpack that she dragged behind her. His forearm brushed tight against her breast and her heart practically stopped in shock. Then heat flooded her, despite the chill from the cold rain.

"This road won't be safe in a few hours," Jagger said as they drove along the coast road into a more rural area.

"Why not?"

"All these hills along the road. There could be mudslides."

"Oh. We don't have those back home. Hardly any hills."

"Where's back home?"

"North Dakota."

"You're a long way from home."

She stared at the windshield wipers, barely keeping the window clear in the heavy rain. "You have no idea."

They drove in silence for a while then Jagger cleared his throat. "I apologize for earlier."

"What?" She frowned.

"The stay and play comment."

Heat flooded her face. Just what she needed, another reminder of him,

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naked in the blaze of lightning. Of Jagger, kissing her. Silence stretched between them, broken only by the sound of rain hitting the windshield, the wipers' rhythm, and the swish of the tires on the wet pavement.

"Oh," she finally said.

"I don't want you to feel uncomfortable coming to my place, thinking I might—"

"Oh! I don't think you'd do anything..." Letha stumbled for words, "that I wouldn't like." Oh! Now it sounded like she was flirting with him!

He smiled but his eyes didn't leave the water-streaked windshield. "I definitely wouldn't do anything you wouldn't like. I'm a big believer in mutual pleasure."

Once again she was struck dumb. *He was talking about sex. Pleasure.*

"I'll quit teasing. I just couldn't resist. But you are safe with me," He spoke in a lower tone, resonant, almost a purr. Her whole body reacted to it, a deep shiver, right to her core.

"I'm not afraid of staying with you. Cody wouldn't have suggested it if it wasn't safe."

"Yes, that's true." He slowed down and turned into a gravel parking lot in front of a large warehouse. They were in a nearly rural area, though she could see another building farther down the road.

"My real home is in Las Vegas, so when I'm in California I stay in a loft apartment here." He pulled the truck through a wide garage door that opened for them. Letha's truck was parked inside, along with various trucks and utility vans. "Nice thing about this is we don't have to go back out into the rain."

"Good, that rain is cold."

"I think we should take the stairs," Jagger said as they got out of his SUV. "The electricity could go out at any moment, and I wouldn't want to be stuck in the elevator."

"The stairs will be fine." She followed him up the steep metal stairs and

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through a door on the landing into a high ceiling loft. Skylights ran with rain, giving the interior a dusky light. Potted plants were everywhere, some quite large, others small and arranged in interesting groupings. The floor was covered by a thick golden brown carpet, the furniture in shades of green, gold and brown. A window with dark green curtains drawn, filled one wall, w faced the beach.

One corner held a modern kitchen area, close to a dining area and a living room grouping. Behind a screen and some tall potted palms was a king sized bed covered in a gold, green and brown velvet quilt.

"This is lovely."

"I find it restful. The bathroom is right through there. You can change and get warmed up. I'll fix something warm to drink."

"Thank you." She set her bags beside the bureau next to the king sized bed. Impulsively she stroked the velvet quilt, enjoying the sensuous feel of the silky fabric under her fingers. It would feel wonderful against bare skin.

Embarrassed at the thought, she pulled some clothes out of her bag and hurried into the bathroom, which was large with gleaming gold fixtures and tan marble. Taking her clothes off in Jagger's bathroom felt a little wicked, even though he was nowhere around. It was that attraction she felt. Anything to do with nakedness took her heated mind right to thoughts of him with the lightning flashing behind him. She changed into black jeans and an ivory, stretch velveteen top, with green embroidery around the scooped neckline. It was warm.

Letha tried to ignore the fact that it also felt very sensual, velvet like the quilt, and flattering, showing the rounded tops of her breasts—far more revealing than anything she'd ever worn before. Except for the pink pajamas.

She was drying her hair with a thick towel when the lights went out, leaving her in darkness. Letha left her hair down—not because Jagger would like it, but because it would dry quicker, she told herself. Her heart rate was a little elevated as she walked back into the large loft room. Spending an entire

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night with Jagger...if she was honest, it wasn't just nerves that were making her heart beat faster.

"The coffee is done. I'll start the fire. That will take some of the chill out of the air."

Letha fixed a cup of coffee and joined Jagger on the couch in front of the fire. Lightning flashed and Letha jumped, nearly spilling her coffee. Jagger reached for the cup in her hand and placed it on the table. The brush of his hand against hers sent a small electrical rush through her. The chill from her earlier drenching vanished as heat suffused her body. Lightning flashed again and the blue of Jagger's eyes flared, intent, serious, focused on her. She could not look away. She licked her lips nervously.

"Cody fixed me a drink," she blurted out, grabbing her coffee mug.

"Did he now?"

"Have you heard about his drinks?"

"The matchmaking drinks? Yeah. That's been going on for years. You think he made you a matchmaking drink?"

"It was called Tiger Juice."

He smiled and she realized how rare his smiles were since she'd never seen one from him over the weeks she'd known him, and how potent they were. He had dimples. "So how do you feel? Are you all crazy for me?" he teased.

To her mortification, she blushed. The way his eyes watched her she knew he noticed.

"I'm just teasing, Letha. Neither Cody or I would want to compel you to do something you are not comfortable with." He gave a gentle smile this time. "And I too come from a different upbringing than most people. An upbringing with many expectations that others don't share."

She caught onto that, glad to leave the minefield of sex behind. "Maybe that is what Cody meant. He said something about us having something in common because of our backgrounds."

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"Ahh, you too were raised by an Old World clan of white tiger shifters?"

She giggled. "Gruber, North Dakota, and white tiger shifters are a world apart. Shifters were only in stories. Though the old world part sounds about right. It was a religious colony straight from somewhere in Russia."

"My family connections are also in Russia. From the mountains in central Russia, actually."

"Have you ever been there?"

"No. My clan left a couple of centuries ago, because of the constant wars. They were part of many circuses and traveling shows, with tiger acts."

"Cody said you clan has arranged marriages."

"Less now than a generation ago."

"I left because my uncle wanted me to marry again. I didn't like the man the pastor and my uncle picked."

While she spoke Jagger added wood to the fireplace and soon the warmth defeated the dampness from the storm. As he returned to the couch Letha noticed his strong thighs under the worn denim. Her eyes seemed to have a will of their own, traveling the entire length of his hard body only to stop at the sensual curve of his mouth.

"Yeah," he spoke in a husky whisper. "That kiss." Once again he took the coffee mug out of her hands. "We should try it again, just to see."

"See what?" her voice came out in a whisper.

"See if it was..." he pulled her close, and she rested against him, suddenly boneless, "as hot as we remember."

"Oh," she breathed, and then his mouth was on hers, open, searching, glorious. The storm intensified outside, drowning them in the sounds of the howling wind and the booms of thunder. Pressed chest to chest their bodies seemed to vibrate with the storm and the pounding of their hearts. One kiss lead to another, some wild meetings of tongues and lips, others gentle probing, feather-light brushes of sensitized lip against lip. Letha slid her arms around his neck holding him tight, anchoring herself to him in a whirlwind of

desire.

Jagger pulled back." If we don't stop right now, I won't be able to," he whispered, "and I don't have protection. No disease; shifters can't catch human illnesses. But..." his voice trailed off into a frustrated sigh.

"I was married for six years, and we wanted children, but it didn't happen. I haven't had all the fancy tests, but I think I'm...not likely to get pregnant." Letha whispered with her lips against his ear because she wanted to taste him, every inch, so even this small touch was satisfying.

"I'm not going to say that's a good thing." Jagger moved so he could look into her eyes. He rubbed his thumb along her lower lip. "But it frees us tonight during this storm."

His understanding brought tears to her eyes and she had to kiss him.

Letha felt like part of the storm, wild, out of control. Whether or not she should be here with him, do this with him, meant nothing now. It was inevitable. Elemental.

Their attraction was white hot, he thought as he carried her to the bed. Desire raced through him like liquid electricity in his blood. Her eyes were half shut as he carried her to the bed, lips soft and red from his kiss. He met her eyes, and knew there was no going back. In a swift move he set her on the bed then pulled off her shirt, leaving her in a yellow lace bra. Letha fell back against the pillows, and the shy farm girl was gone. Her smoldering look was that of a siren. She licked her lower lip, beckoning him.

Letha could not even feel embarrassed, lying on the bed with just a bra on top. The way Jagger looked at her made her quiver, deep inside. His blue eyes followed the movement of her tongue as she licked her suddenly dry lips. She was in his bed, and her intentions were every bit as wicked as they could be, She would seize this night.

Jagger pulled off his shirt, unzipped his jeans; the expression in his eyes a

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masculine challenge she'd never experienced before. Letha met it with her own challenge. She sat up, and pulled down her bra straps. With his eyes following her movements with cat-like intensity, she slowly unhooked her bra and freed her breasts.

Jagger got onto the bed in one swift pounce, landing on her with arms at her sides, his chest just inches from her tingling nipples.

He growled, and the sharp points of his teeth traced the curve of her neck.

She knew Jagger was going to bite her, and she welcomed it. Her heart beat wildly and she grabbed his head, tangling her fingers in his silky hair, not gentle at all. Not gentle, not careful caresses or soft thrusts, this was going to be wild and hard, and she knew it would bring fulfillment like she'd never known.

Jagger's teeth clamped into her neck at the curve of her shoulder. Exquisite pain and pleasure ripped through her. She dragged at his jeans, wanting flesh, smooth and hard, against her. He pulled off her pants so she would be free.

Clothes gone, he moved back over her and she gripped him with her knees, reveling the smooth hot skin, the delicious weight of his hard body on hers.

Jagger's mouth found her swollen nipples, and she moaned in relief as his wet mouth surrounded one, then the other, each suck and flick of his tongue, each sharp nip of his teeth going straight to her pussy, drenching her.

The sensual aroma of arousal filled the air. Jagger nuzzled her neck with a deep growl and he worked her legs apart with his knees. He inched down her body, heated gaze meeting her own. Cupping her breasts in his hands he massaged them, pushing them high and together so he could tongue her nipples in slow licks, until she squirmed under him.

"Very pretty," he whispered in a raspy voice and the words went through her with heated delight.

Moving lower, he trailed his tongue down her stomach to her curls below,

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and she shivered. He nipped her soft belly, his passion-dark eyes nearly glittered during a lightning strike. One slow, hot lick along her inner thigh, where her moisture had dripped, then another, slow, making her throb with unfulfilled need so that she groaned and pulled at his silky hair like a wild thing. With a deep animal growl, inhuman, vibrating through her whole body, he covered her aching clit with his open mouth. The wet slow suckle made her heart thud hard. His tongue slowly traced her clit then pressed hard against the nub. Then he started again, suckling, licking. Slow, torturously slow.

Two long fingers glided deep inside her with hard thrusts, while his tongue flicked hard and fast. It was too much, it was just enough. Letha went over the edge into mindless pleasure.

Before she could think or move he entered her, deep, far deeper than his fingers, fuller than she'd ever been. Shards of pleasure shot through her entire body. Again and again Jagger pounded into her, hard and swift, a wild thing, his breathing coming in gasps and growling purrs.

Letha returned his thrusts with her own rushing movements, greedy, the hunger between them not assuaged. Through her eyelashes she viewed him, his hair damp and curled with sweat on his forehead, the intense glitter of his eyes, hot color on his cheekbones, and knew it was as intense for him as it was for her. With her own growl she pulled him down tight onto her body, reveling in his hard weight, and she bit him in the exact curve of the neck he'd marked her. He cried out a roar and she welcomed his wild movements, as she flew apart again, and welcomed his seed deep into her.

Letha, more exhausted than after a long day at work, snuggled next to Jagger. Wrapped in his arms, with the sound of his slow, even breathing in her ear she fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter Five

Thunder boomed, and the warm body next to her moved away.

In the pitch black night, hard hands, more clawed than before, woke her. Instinctively she knew he was partially changed, Jagger was spooned behind her and the warm silk of his fur felt along her back, and the legs that twined through hers were hard and furred.

With a deep growl, he moved swiftly, turned her onto her stomach and pulled her onto her knees.

A tongue, rough textured, wild, licked down the crack of her bottom, hot breath from his mouth made her shiver. She couldn't be shocked because it felt wickedly good. She spread her legs far apart as she could while still up on her knees and he maneuvered under her, hard clawed hands gripping her buttocks, silken fur along his arms and chest providing a sensual overload. Jagger's rough tongue hit her clit in a shock of pleasure. Her body responded to the licks with an explosive orgasm as he flicked her clit.

Her knees weakened and she would have collapsed on the bed, but huge hands gripped her hips and he entered her from behind, impossibly large, demanding she take him fully. Letha could feel his fur, as he draped over her backside, she wanted to look at him but he growled when she twisted to see him, and thrust all the harder when she tried to turn to face him.

"You're part tiger, I want to see."

"Too dark for your human eyes."

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“Jagger,” she made her voice pouty. With a sigh that was nearly a growl he eased away from her long enough to light a candle on the dresser so she could see him. He was human shaped but tiger furred, his cock larger than she remembered, pulsing red. Wild, dangerous eyes followed her every move, like a cat ready to pounce.

With a grin she snuffed out the candle then ran with a shriek into the living room area. Jagger growled and her whole body reacted with a start at the savage sound, so close—her pussy twitched. Delicious panic filled her and she had to force herself to not giggle. She slipped over an ottoman then felt her way to the long curtains covering the window overlooking the beach.

With a roar he was there tearing the curtains out of the way

“Jagger,” she gasped but he didn’t speak. Strong, clawed arms gripped around her forcing her legs apart, shoving her back up against the cold glass. His cock, rock hard, aggressive, prodded between her legs, then he rammed into her.

“Mine,” he growled.

She shrieked in shock but also pleasure, raking her nails down his back and wrapping her legs tight about his thrusting hips.

He paused, throbbing deep inside her then gripped her face in his hand crushing her mouth with his.

“Won’t hurt you... feels so good this way...” his voice rasped as he thrust again and she swiveled her hips, reveling in his length and the wild hard thrusts. With a growl he gripped her shoulder between sharp teeth and they came in a sharp explosion.

Letha awoke much later to lashing rain on the roof, and dim grey light through the uncovered window near the kitchen. They had collapsed into sleep, and to her surprise it was morning. Jagger was asleep, a red bite mark on his neck visible in the light, his body human shaped but still covered in the white and black pelt of his tiger shape. *I did that.* She swallowed hard. She’d

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been—animalistic. Biting, clawing. They'd had sex over and over again in the deep night. Parts of her body ached, but it was a satisfying ache.

She stretched, luxuriating in easing her muscles.

Her hands! In horror she looked at her hands. White, downy fur covered the backs of her hands, and her finger nails were thick and claw-like. She leaped out of bed, Jagger didn't even stir. Her legs were covered with fur, though human shaped. She rushed into the bathroom and struck a match to light one of the candles, her hand shaking.

What happened? *Oh my god.*

Her hair was pure white, and thick like a mane. No human hair looked like that, cresting on her head. Her face was still skin, but the down gradually started down the sides of her neck and under her chin. White down covered the rest of her skin looking like a white velvet body suit.

But it was her eyes. Yellow, cat-like eyes. Scary, nightmare eyes.

Demon. She'd reverted to her demon form. *They were right all along, at Covenant.* The wild night of sex—it changed her. She should have known better. Coming here, living the free and easy lifestyle, sleeping with a shifter—

Jagger could change shape at will. Maybe she could, too. If she could, then she could hide it. Forever. Go back to Covenant....She held onto the counter, squeezed her eyes shut, willed herself back to human form. Nothing changed.

Panic overwhelmed her. The urge to run couldn't be denied. She needed to be outside, be alone to think, to beg for her human body back, to run until she was exhausted. Then maybe she would turn back into herself.

Letha raced out the door and flew down the stairs in two leaps to the garage below. Her truck beckoned but she didn't have the keys, and she didn't want to sit. Later. She'd get the truck later.

Cody. He might be able to change her back. He was a demon vampire, he knew all about such things. She hoped.

Rain pelted her but she didn't feel a chill. Letha ran, barefoot, toward the beach. She would run up the beach to the Del Fantasma. No one would be on

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the beach during this storm, no one would see her.

Wind took her breath away, but running did not. It was several minutes before she realized that a human couldn't run like this, through brush and gravel, over wet sand and mud. She was far stronger, faster, her long legs covered the distance toward the Del Fantasma quickly. And it felt good to use her muscles to take long strides, leap over rock and down gullies. She wasn't even out of breath.

The storm had subsided sometime in the night to a drenching rain, but it rolled off her fur. She could feel the damp, but she wasn't cold.

A cliff jutted out toward the sea, and she could see a mound of earth at its base. She wouldn't be able to run through that. She must be near the hilly area they'd passed through yesterday.

A sob broke through. In one short night, she had changed. Last night the passion had been as strong as this storm. Confusion wracked her and she slowed to a walk.

I still cry human tears. Cody gave me that drink. Was it black magic? NO! Jagger is a good man. Shifter. And Cody has been so good to me.

Doubt made her stomach tight. *Maybe I shouldn't go back to the Covenant....*

Letha moved up the beach toward the highway.

A deafening roar drowned out the pound of the surf and the rain, the ground shook beneath her feet, and she was flung to the ground. Then a screech of tires braking hard, just around the bend, ended in an ominous crash.

Letha scrambled to her feet and ran around the bend

A mudslide covered the highway and a car's back end showed through the mud. To her horror she heard the cry of a baby, and the wail of another small child.

A large section of earth slid down, barely missing the car. *They are going to die if more mud covers them!*

Letha reached the car, and began scrapping at the mud, trying to get to a door. Her hands were not scooping much mud away and it was very heavy.

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Looking around she found a tree limb. Wielding it like a knife she raised it to the mud covered car and scraped at the mud on the vehicle, making more progress but not enough. Another slide could cover them completely, and they could die.

"Here, I'll take this end." Jagger, partially shifted, was there, and her heart leaped within her. It would be alright.

With both of them wielding the tree limb they were able to scrape it down the side of the car. In her human form she never could have moved the heavy mud, but finally a door was free. Jagger wrenched it open and handed her a small child and a baby.

"The mother is unconscious. I'll carry her," Jagger yelled above the storm and the crying children. He pulled a young blond woman out of the car very gently. Letha felt a pang of jealousy. She knew it was irrational, but seeing another woman in his arms was a little upsetting.

You can't rescue them by yourself; of course he has to carry her. She scolded herself while they rushed through the pouring rain.

They had to wade through mud and debris, as quickly as possible before another mudslide swept them all away. The tremendous weight of the mud slowed them down. She heard a roar and Jagger pulled her and her burdens with one arm while holding the unconscious woman over one shoulder with the other. Once free of the mud, they ran along the empty highway.

"Down to the beach. Too dangerous here," Jagger yelled. Letha understood; they needed to be away from the hillside. Skidding and leaping downhill, clutching the screaming children, she got down to the beach. They ran as fast as possible along the beach carrying their burdens to the Del Fantasma.

Chapter Six

The door to the Del Fantasma flew open as they screamed for help, and willing hands helped them inside to warmth and safety. Letha recognized a few of the men inside the bar, all regulars who were also friends of Cody's.

They took the small family into Cody's office and soon they were drying the children with bar towels then wrapping them in dry clothes provided by the men.

"I'm trained as a medic." A young man started examining the woman while others pulled off her soaked clothes and wrapped her in blankets. "The kids look all right but I'm concerned that the mother is unconscious," the young medic reported.

"The phones are down, but a couple of the weres can take her and the kids to the hospital in a SUV. She needs to be checked over by a doctor."

"There's more of you here than I expected," Jagger said.

"Yes, the para community has been talking about organizing for disaster situations," the young man said as he checked the woman's pulse. "When Cody asked for help, a lot of us got together and volunteered. So many of our people are vulnerable, due to their special needs. Nothing formal yet, but it's a start. Cody is letting us use the Del Fantasma as our base."

At that moment Cody entered the office and they reported the situation.

As they got them wrapped up to transport the mother began to wake. "Your children are fine, we got them dried off. We should get you to the

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hospital, though. You were unconscious for at least thirty minutes,” the young man told her.

“Is it safe from more mudslides?” The woman’s voice was weak but she clutched her children to her as though she would never let them go.

“Yes, we can avoid the hillsides,” the young medic told her.

They took the woman and children. The little boy waved at Letha. “By kitty lady.”

Cody turned to Jagger and Letha, who had held back so the human woman wouldn’t see them in their shifted state. “I’m going back to bed. Help yourselves to what you need. I’ll have some clothes brought up,” He grinned and shook his head as he went out the door. “You really shouldn’t let her run around like that. It could cause a riot.”

Jagger glanced at Letha and his eyes widened. “Lord,” he said, and grabbed a damp towel from the pile they used to dry the family. He draped it around her.

“What?” Letha asked.

“Sweetheart, your fur covers nothing. We don’t want the guys in the bar getting an eyeful.”

“Oh.” Embarrassed, Letha pulled the towel around her then quickly scrambled into a long sleeved t-shirt and baggy sweats that someone handed Jagger through the door.

“What happened to us? To me?” Jagger, she noticed, had shifted completely back to human form. Cody’s clothes were a little large for him, but he looked normal, unlike her.

“I don’t know. This is not something I’ve ever heard about. But we know you are some kind of paranormal.”

“How do you know?”

He shrugged. “Cody mentioned you were some kind of para, but that you didn’t know what kind.

She nodded. “Demon blood runs in my mother’s family. I’ve been told

that all my life."

"Is that why you ran out into the storm? Because you thought you were a demon?"

"I was...shocked at myself. At how wild I was. And I couldn't make myself change back. What kind of life could I live, looking like this? All my life I've been different, but if I tried I could hide it."

Jagger moved close and brushed a finger over her cheek, capturing a tear.

"I'm sure there is a way back to your other form. We just don't know what it is yet. These are the type of things para children learn from their families, their clan."

"I don't have that." Letha sank down on the couch, feeling so alone, all her family gone. Another tear trickled down her cheek.

Jagger moved and squatted down in front of her. "Look, Cody has connections all over the para community. He'll be able to help. And you can stay with me, for as long as it takes."

"This isn't your fault."

He shrugged. "I wanted you, in every way I could get you, last night. So if the sex had something to do with this change, I was part of it."

It was too much. Stay at his place, live in hiding.... "I'm so tired I can't think," Letha said, rubbing a suddenly aching forehead.

She did look tired, Jagger thought, not surprising after the night they'd had, followed by the effort of saving the small family. Plus the shock of shifting.

Suddenly Jagger remembered something, but he didn't want to say anything. He'd make a few phone calls to kin before he said anything to Letha. He remembered some old bedtime stories from his childhood.... He rose swiftly.

"Why don't you get a nap on the couch? We can talk to Cody tonight. I'll get one of the guys to fix you a sandwich and someone to run me to one of my

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garages, so I can get a vehicle. That'll take awhile because we'll have to go the long way to my apartment."

Letha nodded. "Maybe all I need is sleep. My bedding is still in the closet." She rose to get her things.

"Stay there. I'll get it." He brought the sleeping bag and pillow, and helped her arrange them. "I'll find out how the family is doing, too."

He feathered a kiss across her forehead, though part of him wanted to crush those pink lips and seek her heat. But now wasn't the time.

"Yes, I want to know how they are." Letha's eyes fluttered shut and he watched her sleep for a moment. She'd be safe here, the guys in the bar were all well known to him, and the night shift was sleeping like the dead.

"Sure thing, kitty lady." He left while her lips curved into a gentle smile.

* * * *

A familiar voice woke Letha, but no one was in the room. She frowned then pulled back the blanket to see if she'd changed back in her sleep, but she was still covered with white down.

"Letha."

Faster than the eye could track, a spirit orb hovered right in front of her. None had ever come so close. It was about the size of a melon, translucent but with glimmers of color deep inside. Lovely.

"Letha, it's Mama."

"Mama?" Letha whispered. *Mama?*

Another globe, larger and more colorful, floated near. "I knew you would be able to hear us if we stayed nearby." The satisfied voice belonged to her grandmother.

"You're here? Not in heaven?"

"Sweetie, it's hard to explain. We are kind of in both places at once."

"Oh."

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"This has been a very odd day, Mama. Grandma."

"We know, dear. And we're so glad you are here. It was meant to be. Here you will get your answers."

Hope filled her. Answers? "I'll be able to get back to my human form?"

"Yes, dear," Grandma said. "Shifting is a protective action. The women in our clan changed when our mates were in need of rest and protection. For a few hours, or days, or years, we became the strength of the clan."

"But I don't have a mate."

Mama laughed softly. "I think your other self already knows, but your human self lags behind."

"But it never happened with Ben. And he was so weak. He needed protection."

"And you were so young," Mama replied, her beautiful colors pulsating. "Both of you should have been under the protection of your families, your kin."

"Plus, just being married to Ben protected *you*, sweetie," Grandma said. "Once he was gone, your life became far more dangerous."

"Letha, we can't stay here with you much longer," Mother spoke. "This is no longer our home. But you can find the answers you need here. Please don't return to Covenant."

"I won't, Mama." Letha started to cry.

"We will be together again," Mama reassured her.

A very small globe floated toward her, and rested against the larger Grandma orb. This orb was clear like glass, without the beautiful colors of the other two orbs.

"Someone wants to say hello," Grandma's orb said.

"Letha."

The voice tugged at her heart. "Ben? Is that really you?"

"Yes. I wanted to say that I love you. I don't want you to be alone in the world. Jagger is a good man." His voice was already fading away.

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"We've talked with his kin," Grandma said.

"Don't be afraid, Letha. Live the life you were meant to live." Ben's voice was barely audible. "Have children..."

"Ben? Will I see you again?"

"Someday, sweetie. Someday, when it is time," Grandma answered for him since Ben's orb faded away. Both the larger orbs began to fade, too. "We will all be together someday, but now we must go. Be happy."

Chapter Seven

Jagger finally got to a warehouse with a working telephone. He talked to his sister Adella, but while she remembered the bedtime stories, she had no real information. "You'll have to call Grandma Zhenya."

He knew it, though he didn't want to go into detail with his grandmother, he called anyway.

"Letha, the woman, was human in shape but covered with silky fur. Not completely covered, her face was hair-free. And she was super strong and fast."

"I see." Grandmother said.

"And there's more. I, um, changed too. Human limbs but white tiger coat, like a half shift, but I could sustain it without effort."

"Are you going to marry that girl?"

So much for skirting the sex issue, Jagger thought ruefully. Grandma was ancient in morals, which was why Jagger hadn't gone into details of the passionate night prior to Letha's shift and his own change.

He sighed. "It's a little too soon for that. We were forced to spend the night together due to the storm."

"Nonsense. This wouldn't happen if this was just some *affair*. She's not White Tiger Clan, but there is a history of our clans intermarrying. She is entirely suitable."

Suitable. The word didn't describe Letha at all. She was far more than

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suitable. But he didn't want to discuss his feelings for Letha with his grandmother.

"Could you tell me about her clan?"

Grandma Zhenya could, indeed. When he was done speaking with her, he drove as quickly as possible to the Del Fantasma to fetch Letha back to his place.

Letha was still inside the small office, still in her shifted form, but she looked rested and not so strained around the eyes. He felt suddenly lighter, burden free.

"I have information," he said. "Let's go home and I'll explain what I learned. Later we can get a hold of Cody if we need to."

Letha nodded and smiled, and there seemed to be real joy in her smile, in her eyes. Jagger grinned back, "Everything all right?"

"Oh, yes!"

On the long, indirect drive back to his place Jagger told Letha the information his Grandmother Zhenya had passed on.

"My family comes from a remote mountain area in Russia. The Altai. Inaccessible, except for a few mountain passes. Our clan lived in small river valleys and on the hillsides. Further up in the mountains there were people who lived in even more remote areas. They mined gold and jewels, and traded with our people. They were also known as healers with magical abilities. They were Seers who could talk to the Ancestors. Sometimes they brought forth prophecies or wisdom from the other side." Jagger glanced at her to find her eyes wide, absorbing his words. "Messages that helped our people."

"The women of this clan were shifters, but they didn't shift into a known animal shape like our clan. They shifted into a fur cover human. Grandma thinks Yeti's are related to this clan. And only the women shifted."

"Some married into our clan. They were even more vulnerable to Outsiders than we were. But only a few of their daughters had the ability to

shift into the fur covered body."

"And I am descended from them." *Not demon.*

"Yes. I think so. They disappeared long ago, as a people. Long before my clan left the mountains to hide in traveling shows." They reached his warehouse and he opened the garage door since the electricity was still out.

While they walked up to the apartment they were silent. Letha needed to tell him what happened at the bar. "While you were gone, Jagger, something happened to me. I see things others don't see. Spirit orbs and auras, especially at the Del Fantasma. But today three spirit orbs spoke to me. They were my mother, and grandmother, and Ben."

"Ben."

"My husband. He died several years ago. They spoke to me." Letha did not want to start crying.

"Grandma said your people could speak with the Ancestors."

She nodded, eyes full of unshed tears and Jagger pulled her to the couch and into his arms. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. It was comforting. Not scary or weird. They are my family who love me."

They were quiet for a few minutes, wrapped in each other's arms.

"Your people were known for mining a beautiful blue jewel, also." Jagger said after a while. "In the stories the jewels were magic. They gazed into the jewels and shifted."

Letha sat up straight and looked at him, then flew out to her own vehicle in the garage, Jagger right behind her. She dug through her belongings and pulled out a small wooden box, beautifully carved with a geometric flower design.

"This came from my mother's family. It is very old; the only family heirloom we have." Letha opened the box and took out a small black velvet bag.

Inside was a gold ring set with a small blue stone. "Mama said it was a

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blue topaz.” She slid it on then looked into the stone intently. “She said it was a home stone, but we didn’t know what that meant, except that it was from our homeland.” Her body shimmered. The claws and white hair disappeared, leaving Letha luminous and entirely human.

“Home stone. Home is a safe place. You don’t need to be in a protective mode now. You are home and safe. Home with me.” Jagger took her into his arms. She slid her arms around his neck and brushed lips against his. A sense of profound comfort, joy and love filled her.

“I know what I am. And I’m not anything like an evil demon. I’m a protector.”

Jagger growled. “You’re *home*. With me.”

She deepened the kiss and her entire body flooded with desire.

“Yes, Jagger. I’m home. With you.”

Epilogue

The wedding reception was in full swing. Cody made another pitcher of Tiger Juice and Goldie loaded it onto her serving tray with several glasses.

"I still can't believe that the ol' lady likes this stuff." She wagged her head and glanced at Zhenya, the white haired matriarch of the White Tiger clan, sitting next to Jagger and Letha at the head table. "There's plenty of champagne."

"She wants to hire me to match up more of her grandchildren," Cody muttered. "She's sentimental."

The reception was an odd mix of American Paras, Old World White Tiger clan members, Del Fantasma staff, who were working and partying, and sophisticated, young clan members from the entertainment capitols of the world.

"Well, how hard could that be? They are all scrumptious looking. You going to do it?"

Cody glanced at the small white haired woman dressed in pale pink silk. "I think I'm scared not to."

Del Fantasma: Tiger Juice

Tiger Juice

1 ½ oz Canadian whisky

½ oz lemon juice

1 oz orange juice

Pour the whiskey, lemon and orange juice into a cocktail shaker half-filled with ice cubes. Shake well, strain into a cocktail glass, and serve.

Melisse Aires

About the Author

Take a shy, chubby, Catholic schoolgirl bookworm from Montana. Hand her a stack of her much older brother's sci fi, fantasy novels, James Bond books and horror comics. Later, introduce Barbara Cartland and the world of romance fiction. In college, turn her boy, party and rock n roll crazy.

Get her a job or two in authentic, one room Montana schools, ala Laura Ingels Wilder.

Marry her off to a great guy, move her to a big city in Tornado Alley, then pop three daughters out of her in twenty two months(one set of identical twins).

By middle school the daughters should only agree on a few points – alternative rock music, the beauty of black nail polish, their absolute blindness to dirt, and the need for more money. Become a marching band mom and learn what a flugelhorn is, and how much it costs.

Then, make her a jinx--every great genre TV show she loves gets the ax--*Beauty and the Beast*, *Dark Angel*--and Buffy and Spike NEVER have a happy ending! She gets upset about no romance in the world, and fires up to write her own stories with happy endings.

Throw this all together into a small house in Wyoming, along with a large dog and too many cats, shake constantly and pour it out onto a computer keyboard.

There! You have me, Melisse Aires.