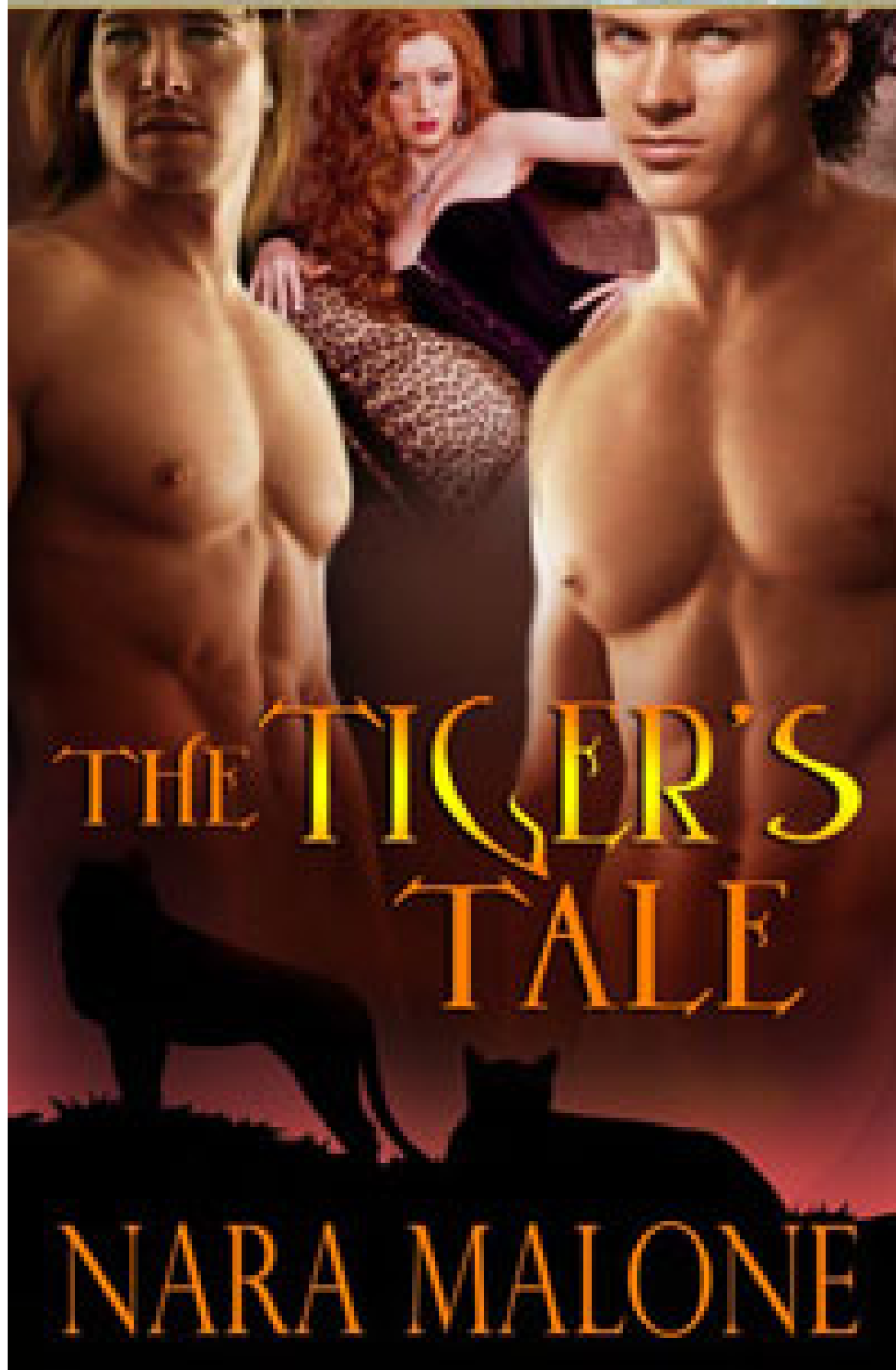


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



## The Tiger's Tale

Nara Malone

Never quite fitting in, Marie has always struggled with her identity. Adam has shown her just how sensual she can be, but despite this awakening she still doesn't feel complete. That's because she's not. Orphaned at birth and raised by humans, practical Marie has no idea of her dual heritage as tiger and woman, or the role she must play to save her species.

When Adam discovers that his alluring girlfriend is not only a Pantherian tiger but carries unique genetic traits that could save their species, he asks Ean to join them as the third partner in the traditional Pantherian mating triad. With the future of the species at stake, the sexy shifters have only one week to convince her that not only is she a tiger, but she must mate with both men to save the Pantherians from extinction.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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The Tiger's Tale

ISBN 9781419927126

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Cover art by Dar Albert

Electronic book publication March 2010

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The Tiger's Tale

Nara Malone

Dedication

To my first and most dedicated fan. Miss you, Daddy.

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## Chapter One

The five hundred pound Bengal paced the lab's length, covering the distance between window and door in four strides, bumping against work tables and file cabinets when he turned. His rigid tail sliced the air like a rudder, straight, stiff, save for the agitated twitch at the tip.

Ean paced. Ean twitched. Adam tapped.

The steady click of his mouse marked passing minutes like a clock, reminding Adam how little time he had to waste and how far he had to go. The screen flickered as, one by one, pages of DNA diagrams displayed.

The effect on the tiger was like a dripping faucet.

Pushed to his limit, Ean padded up to Adam. Yellow eyes blazed. Nostrils flared. A soft growl rumbled in his chest.

"I'm sorry! We can't lie to her, Ean," Adam said.

With a huff, Ean sat back on his haunches. Paws bigger than Adam's head swiped the air.

"We can't deceive her about something that will alter all of our lives so completely."

Sickle-like claws sheathed and unsheathed. Teeth gnashed. That great tongue flicked out, then coiled in like a whip.

Adam ignored him.

Tap. Tap.

Twitch. Twitch.

Ean rose to as much of his ten-foot length as possible in the cramped quarters. His head nearly scraped the rafters. With a shimmer and ripple in the air around him, he shifted from full-grown tiger to six feet and two hundred pounds of agitated, naked man. He turned away and stomped across the room.

“Stop that clicking or you’ll be eating that mouse.”

Adam ignored the threat. This situation demanded logic, not belligerence and bluster.

Ean shook a tousled mane of hair, a subtle blend of all the tiger’s colors—red and gold and brown. He growled at the tangled clothes he’d kicked under the chair in his pacing. “If you tell Marie the truth, she’ll bolt,” Ean rumbled. “You said as much yourself.”

Tension sparked the air around Ean. He snapped the wrinkles from his pants and yanked them on. His eyes had gone back to the shifter’s mix of blue and gold, a swirl of color as hypnotic in the man as the black-slitted gold had been in the tiger. Temper still blazed in them.

“You can’t let this one chance for what she most wants slip away from her.”

And yet, Marie’s desire would have to be courted. Even with the existence of a species and their bloodlines resting on her compliance, Ean would not force her any more than Adam would.

But wasn’t deception a form of force?

Ean threw himself into a chair. Charts that mapped their destiny fluttered briefly in response to the mental anxiety pulsing like an aura around him.

“Easy,” Adam cautioned. “She may not know her nature but she’s all that we are and she’ll pick up your tension if you don’t get yourself under control.”

Ean huffed and picked up the scattered charts. Thin white sheets quivered in his hands.

Adam leaned back in his chair, studying the code. His finger tapped away, flipping through screens. The codes weren’t going to change any more than the indicators on the fertility charts Ean had in his hands.

“Six days left,” Ean mumbled. The tension around him dimmed as he leaned back, settling into thought, tapping one finger against his lips. Desperation flushed Ean’s face and Adam knew it wouldn’t be a full minute before he erupted again.

It was fifteen mouse clicks.

“If we don’t convince her now, it’s another seven years before she cycles again. It’s too close to her transition. If not now, it might be never.”

“For bonding we need trust, Ean.”

Trust took time. Adam trusted Ean with the most precious thing to come into his life. And that was why Adam had sought Ean. That was why he sent out his call to a friend secluded in a remote corner of India. That was why time had gotten away from them. Now there was too little left to gain the trust they needed from Marie before time ran out altogether.

Adam pushed the mouse aside. His fingers curved around a picture at the corner of his desk instead. He stroked the smooth wood frame with his finger. He'd snapped that picture of her by the river. She'd been perched on a rock, her head tipped back, lost in the music and mood of the water. The lens had captured her surprise when he appeared, a wide-eyed softness laced with sorrow. Had she been wishing even then for the child she believed she could never have? He ran his finger over her coppery curls, traced the lush lines of her figure and wished he could banish the sadness from those haunted blue eyes.

He set the picture carefully in its place next to the computer monitor. Marie looked at him from the frame; their future looked out from the computer screen, mapped in black and white. All that remained was a choice. Which path?

He pushed back from the desk, back from the computer, back from the situation that trapped the three of them. He rose and went to the window, massaging the kink in his neck. Outside the leaves fell in sporadic waves. Another week and they would be gone and so would his chance to give her the child her arms ached to hold.

"I would do anything to give her this," he said. "But how do I make love to her with a lie poisoning what should be precious?"

"I'm not saying lie, Adam." He heard the chair scrape and could feel Ean moving behind him. "I'm saying don't give her every little detail up front."

He stood beside Adam and they both gazed at the brilliant blaze of autumn. Ean's tone softened, coaxed. "We tell her enough to gain cooperation. She doesn't need details until after she conceives."

Adam started to turn away and paused where the light cast a reflection of the two of them standing together. How could they soften the intimidation factor their combined presence created? Adam didn't have Ean's bulk, but he was just as tall. His hair jet black, his eyes the quicksilver of a shifter who had matured to the magus level.

Maturity didn't equal wisdom in all things and in this instance he couldn't find objectivity. He wondered if Ean had. Ean's eyes held conviction that Adam's heart couldn't find.

Was this, after all, his choice to make?

"We'll see how well the two of you get on," he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

The red maple showered color outside the panel of windows that rose from the edge of the tub to the ceiling. Despite the chill and lazy autumn rain, Marie left a window open. Enveloped by the heavy warmth of her bath, she welcomed the crisp rain-scented breeze against her face. Steam curled above the water in tantalizing tendrils the way mists curled between the trunks of oaks and maples along the riverbank.

She heard the soft tick of the door latch and felt Adam's presence, a solid ordered presence, all emotions kept tidy and sorted. Nothing messy about Adam's moods. She smiled. She loved to muss him up, use him up, leave him rumpled with a crooked smile. But the truth was, he usually rumpled her. It started with the sound of his voice. It came to her now, slid down her spine easing out tension, like the soft liquid murmur of water rolling over rock.

“Mine,” he said. Staking a claim, primitive, stark, hot.

Yes, she was and she needed to hear it, to know he wasn’t trying to hand her off to someone else.

“Have you changed your mind about sharing me?”

There was something dark and exotic about the way he moved. He approached with a sleek, fluid grace. Her eyes savored him the way her tongue savored chocolate. The tip of her tongue slid wistfully between her moist lips.

He sat on the tub’s edge. He stirred the water gently with a finger, skimming the surface and then up along the length of her arm. She shivered as if a current moved through her.

“Don’t think of it as me giving you away, or slicing off a share of you for someone else to sample.” He leaned in. The spark in those quicksilver eyes made her chest tight and sucked the oxygen from her lungs. She couldn’t string two words together into a thought when he looked at her that way. His lips touched hers and she felt a familiar pull, a craving. Her lips parted. Her tongue had to taste him, had to feel the stroke of his tongue warm and thick against her own. She whimpered when he drew back.

“This is not division, love, it’s multiplication. I’m not giving you to Ean,” he explained. “I’m giving Ean to you. Together we multiply your pleasure.”

Marie sank deeper into the water until it lapped at the lobes of her ears and dampened the tendrils of hair that had escaped the pins.

“Well, when you put it that way.” She tried to sound light and worldly. It came out sounding lost and squeaky.

Restless, she shifted and mounds of bubbles undulated, glittering cells popping a soft protest. She closed her eyes, let the heat seep into her doubts, soften the wall of worry that held her stiff and aloof. It wasn’t easy to sink into the reality of actually following directions she’d never dared imagine, or the challenge of doing things so totally beyond her vision of herself.

But when she looked at herself through Adam’s eyes she saw someone different, someone braver and bolder. Adam’s faith in her held her fast. Ninety percent of her wanted to run away. But the ten percent of her that didn’t proved stronger. That willful, wanton part. That part lifted her from the water to step into the towel he held for her.

At first, he simply hugged her, folded in the warmth of a heated towel. Then his nose nuzzled her neck. She listened to his deep breath, felt him inhale her scent.

“I like this new bubble bath. Vanilla spice.” He tucked the towel under her arms and fastened it between her breasts. His fingers skimmed up her bare arms and settled to massage her shoulders. “I chose it to relax you.”

“It did.”

“Did it?” His fingers found a particularly tight spot.

“A little,” she amended.

He urged her forward to stand in front of the sink. Candles in crystal bowls added atmosphere; tiny flames flickered, sending diamond-shaped lights and shadows dancing seductively down the walls. Adam's chin rested lightly atop her head. Their reflections shimmered in the long mirror above the sink. His eyes sparkled with pleasure as he opened the towel, exploring her with his fingers and his eyes. Then he bent his head to lick a water droplet on her shoulder, his dark hair a sharp contrast to her ivory skin. A light nip followed his tongue's caress. "You'll be fine," he promised, looking up to meet her eyes.

Marie tried to smile but the result looked more like a grimace. He chuckled, one hand drifting down to stroke her naked mound.

"In the beginning you didn't like this idea." His fingers stroked over satin skin shaved smooth to welcome her lover's tongue. Her breath drew in sharply and her eyelids drooped. She arched her back and pressed toward his soft stroke. Her thighs parted more as he turned her to liquid fire. She remembered the first time she'd felt his breath whisper over her bare pussy. The flick of his tongue right at the edge, teasing and driving her mindless before sending her into orgasm with no more than his breath on her throbbing clit.

She let herself consider having two lovers, one warm tongue licking her bare lips while a cock thrust inside her. She made a humming, almost purring sound in her throat and his finger stroked over her clit where it peeked between the pink flushed lips, dew-soaked and ready. Maybe, she thought. Maybe it wouldn't matter that Ean was a stranger. That he wasn't special to her. Maybe to feel the pleasure two men could give would be enough.

Adam lifted his fingers, fragrant with the scent of her need. He stroked her bottom lip with a sticky finger and smiled when her tongue flicked out to taste. "You've learned to enjoy so many things you never imagined."

She could only nod. Lust flushed her skin, scattered her inhibitions. Pressing her bare bottom against his trousers, she trapped his thick cock under the cloth between her cheeks. She rose on her toes and slid back down, relishing the feel of the fabric against her skin and the rigid shaft sliding along the cleft of her bottom. She saw that flash in his eyes, control pushed to the edge, and licked her lips.

He stepped back. She could hear the slow, careful release of breath. "You hold tight to that thought," he said, reaching around her for the hairbrush and then dropping it.

"I've got it," she said, bending over instead of stooping, knowing exactly where his eyes would be drawn. She straightened slowly and turned to hand it to him. Was that sheen on his forehead perspiration?

He turned her back around. "As I was saying, you'll feel the same about what I'm asking today." He plucked pins from her hair and tossed them on the counter. "Ean needs this, needs us." Adam kissed the top of her head. "He needs you."

Marie shook her hair free. "He's here now?" Red curls tumbled down to tickle the middle of her back.

"He's making lunch. We're going to help him prepare dessert." Adam attempted to tame her hair with the brush.

"You said you had shared lovers with Ean before?"

"I said Ean had invited me to join him in pleasuring someone special to him."



“His wife?”

“They weren’t married at the time.”

Marie chewed her lip. She had wanted to ask her next question since Adam had first brought up this idea. She knew she was treading on delicate territory. “How did she die, Adam?”

His hands went still in her hair. “The Asian Tsunami.”

She heard his slow, measured exhale.

She tried not to think of the news video she’d seen. She didn’t ask for details that would make the horror any more real in her mind. “Are you sure Ean is ready for this?”

Adam pulled the brush through her hair with strokes so hard her head jerked back with each one. She knew he wasn’t aware and kept her discomfort to herself.

“He’s prowled the Himalayas and camped in caves long enough. Maybe at first he needed something that stark to make him feel anything but the grief. Dark caves and ice packs aren’t what he needs now. Now he needs to remember how bright and warm life can be.”

A little worry nagged at Marie. There was more to this story. She couldn’t bring herself to press Adam. She shivered.

Adam put down the brush and smoothed his hands over her hair. “Trust me?”

She nodded, afraid her voice might give away her remaining doubts.

Could an afternoon of lovemaking, something string-free and safe, without expectations, ease Ean back into life again? She didn’t know, but her heart ached for this man she’d never met. Maybe she could overlook her own inhibitions for his sake. Adam finished and tucked a fresh towel around her.

She turned to face him, rose on her toes to kiss the furrows of his frown. “What should I wear to lunch?”

His smile came back. “What you have on will do nicely.”

She laughed. “I’m serious.”

He didn’t laugh. “So am I.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Her fear reached out to Ean while she was still upstairs. He could feel her heart beat with the high, rapid ping of a rabbit headed for the stew pot. And how should she feel, coming to lunch with him, a lunch where she was the only item on the menu that mattered? Her scent rode to him on currents of artificially heated air. Vanilla and spice couldn’t mask the moods her scent carried, a tangy mix of fear laced with desire. They were at the top of the stairs. A few steps and a hallway lay between him and the moment she stepped into the kitchen, a few steps that would start her on the journey toward discovering that the world, and she herself, were nothing like she assumed them to be.

Ean wished he could leave her unaware. He wished he could soothe away her fear.

But she should be afraid, as much of herself as of him. Waking her up, revealing the truth, unleashing that primitive untrained power, should scare them all.

That edge of danger ran through him like a drug, an aphrodisiac, coloring and shaping everything he did. He didn't turn when they first entered the kitchen, allowing his apparent distraction to invite her closer, lure her in. The tigress would respond to the subtle body cues he sent her, even if she couldn't interpret them on a conscious level. He poured mugs of mulled wine, his lips curving over the almost soundless approach of bare feet on the tiled floor.

He heard her shallow breaths, her skittering heartbeat as she gathered her courage. "Hello, Ean."

He waited, his keen senses sweeping out to place Adam, just the other side of the counter. Adam's job was to keep her true nature contained while they slowly got her used to the idea there was more to her than she'd imagined. Adam's heart thumped at a placid pace, steady as a clock, bringing to mind the time marching them all toward a choice. Ean drew a slow breath and willed his own heart to slow before turning to offer her wine.

"Hey." He could feel warmth flowing effortlessly, giddily into his smile. She was such a treasure. Waves of red hair, round curves and lush breasts. He longed to lick her from her ears to her toes.

Her hands curled around the brown stoneware and she stared up into his face. He watched her casual gaze focus and narrow. She sent a glance back at Adam and then her eyes darted nervously about the room. Her head down, shoulders hunched forward, her mood took a dive and the temperature in the room with it.

Baffled, he looked toward Adam for some clue.

*Age.*

The single word telegraphed to him. Ean's acute senses opened her moods to him but not her mind. Adam could both hear and send thoughts when he chose.

Age? Ean was a few years younger than Marie. Wasn't that a plus in choosing a mate?

But her eyes were on the floor now and she was shifting uncomfortably in her towel, trying to tug it tightly closed around her with one hand.

Adam moved in.

He moved up behind Marie, crowding her forward and closer to Ean and reached for the other mug Ean held. "No one has the knack for mulling wine like Ean."

Their eyes met in a stare over Marie's head. Adam was telling Ean to mix some magic between the three of them. But that kind of chemistry had a mind of its own. They'd brought the main ingredients together. He would apply the heat, but the result was out of his hands.

Adam's free hand came around Marie, coaxed the mug in her hand upward. Nestled there against Adam, in the curve of his arm, she peeked at Ean over the rim as she sipped. He watched her nostrils flare faintly at the spicy scent, her pink tongue slip out to test the heat and lick up a drop. He thought of

exactly where he'd like her to lick him, of where he'd like to lick her. Everywhere.

His tongue craved her skin with an intensity that was consuming. Licking her was not a desire but a necessity. But you couldn't just grab a woman and start licking her. Unfortunately.

And this particular female had been raised with human ideas about sex, beauty, and how old her lover could be. He felt a growl rising in his chest, turned his head and coughed to stifle it.

She jumped and wine sloshed on her fingers. Before she could wipe the hand on her towel, he captured it, lifting those quivering fingers to his lips. He felt the heat of wine against his lips and blood pulsing in her veins under silky skin. His tongue trembled, caged behind his teeth, screaming the need to start at the tips of her fingers and lick and lick and lick. Somewhere, somewhere deep, he found the discipline to shape his lips into the semblance of a kiss. How could he move politely from kissing and handholding to the business of licking?

An idea formed, a sinful idea. He flashed a smile that had her wedging deeper against the safety of Adam, even while her eyes widened and pupils darkened. He knew just how he would apply the heat.

She watched him like a doe watching a lion. That sweet pink tongue darting out to swipe her lips had the same effect as a deer flicking its tail at a lion. Or like waving the red flag at a bull. Or—

*Enough!* Adam's intrusion snapped Ean's mind back to the point in hand.

He might be a predator but she was a mate—not prey. Let the wooing begin.

"It didn't burn," she said. He must have looked as blank as he felt. "The hot wine..." He realized he was still poised to kiss with his lips against her fingers and straightened. Her gaze dropped to his chest, his bare chest, and he drew a sharp breath at the heat he felt where eyes touched. She licked her lips again. "It didn't burn me." Sweat sprang up at the back of his neck under hair that suddenly felt too thick and heavy. He cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry. Heated rooms are stifling for me. I should've put my shirt on before you came down." Now he was babbling.

"It's okay," her voice cracked. She coughed, commented on the strong spices in the wine and looked away. But her eyes came back, a little flick of a glance. At his nipples?

At a look from Ean, Adam nodded and edged aside, allowing Ean to maneuver her toward the stove. Ean slid an arm around her shoulder, curled her close to him as they moved. The gesture was casual enough that she couldn't protest and possessive enough to stir her embers and set the scent of her desire loose to tease his nostrils. The temperature crept up another ten degrees.

"So, you know your way around Adam's kitchen. You can help me."

It all looked ordinary enough, bowls, spoons, clean towels, wax paper. Yet she held back, leaning into him and away from the stove as if she found it more threatening than him.

"I don't normally spend much time in the kitchen," she mumbled. "Things have a tendency to go up in flames when I do."

Ean swiped the back of his hand across his damp forehead. That side effect he could certainly

understand.

“Cooking is an art,” Ean told her, wishing he didn’t sound like a professor launching into a lecture. He’d be happy when he could use his tongue for something it was good at. He reached behind his back and Adam pressed a thick chocolate bar into his open palm. “You mix just the right elements, in the right order, add heat and you create something new and unique.”

“Sounds more like chemistry.”

“No, it’s more than science, there’s a bit of magic to it, an alchemy.” He brought the bar of chocolate around in front of her.

“Dipping chocolate. What are we dipping?” She tipped her head back against his chest to see his face and Ean was pleased to see gold sparking in her blue eyes, the shy curve to her lips. She must hear what that did to his heart; it was banging like a jungle drum right next to her ear.

He clamped his jaw tight. He had to lick her. Just one quick swipe of his tongue, along her neck, over her ear. He looked longingly at her ten pink toes. They were licking toes.

*Ean!*

Right.

“I’m sure we can find something that needs dipping.” He gave her a look, a look that said *I’ll melt you in my hands and in my mouth and on my tongue.*

He felt her quiver, a yes-please quiver, a delicate little shudder that had his willpower going liquid, melting him.

She swallowed carefully, glanced quickly around and tried to pretend she didn’t know what they had just said to each other.

She knew.

“So how can I help?” The whispery tremor in her voice did not get by Ean’s heightened senses.

He smiled. “You can be the magic.”

He handed Marie the chocolate. “You know *bain de marie*?”

She slid a short, polished nail under the wrapper edge and peeled the brown paper back. Adam was already at the sink filling a stainless steel pot. Ean reached above her head and lifted a clear Pyrex bowl from the cabinet.

Adam moved past them to the other side of Marie, lit the stove and set the pan to heat. “Break it into small pieces, love.”

She obeyed, still frowning over Ean’s question. “Something to do with baths?”

Ean’s mind had run off again. It left him standing there with the bowl raised in one hand while his other hand got lost in her copper curls, still damp at the ends from her bath. Her creamy skin flushed pink. So

very lickable.

Adam reached up and grabbed the bowl with an impatient twist that refocused Ean. *Say yes, Ean.*

“Yes,” he said, his voice creaking. He grabbed his own mug of wine and drank deeply. What had he said yes to?

Adam filled in, “It’s an alchemist’s technique, a gentle way to heat something volatile and delicate.”

Ean ran a finger over her bare shoulder, right down her arm to her elbow, tracing the path his tongue longed to follow. His finger drifted back up and followed the edge of snow white terry cloth. He picked up the trail Adam left him.

“This way you get a slow softening, gently liquefy, rather than send things up in flames.” He might have imagined that soft responsive whimper, but he noticed Adam cocked his head and then encouraged Ean to press his advantage.

*Okay. One lick. Stay focused.*

Ean wanted to hug Adam.

“Is it really called that?” Marie asked.

“Hmmm?” He was deciding just where...

*“Bain de marie. Is it really called that?”*

“Yes, after the inventor,” Adam said, handing Marie a dish of butter.

Ean chose.

She had the plate in one hand, pushed her hair back with the other and there, that flash of bare neck, right where it met the soft curve of her shoulder... His tongue dove and licked a sweet line of heaven right up to her earlobe. She swayed, a wave of desire washing through her and into Ean. He steadied her with both hands, steadied himself, and Adam moved in to keep them all on course.

“Butter your hands, Marie. Here, just grab it up and squeeze it.” Watching her hands curl around the stick of butter, watching creamy white butter soften and ooze between her slender fingers had Ean’s brain softening and oozing.

Adam took the plate and handed the bowl to Marie. “Butter the inside, coat it thoroughly.”

Ean nuzzled her neck and imagined her coating various parts of him in something sticky, warm and fragrant. His knee moved between her thighs from behind and he pulled her tight against him while his tongue licked the edge of her ear.

Adam had to catch the bowl when it slipped from her fingers.

She pressed back onto Ean’s leg, that hot little pocket of hers smoldering against his thigh. That delicious bottom nestled against him with a wriggle and a rub. He couldn’t quell the need to bite, a quick nip to her ear.

She turned her head with a whimper, looked at him. He could feel the cat surface, see the hunter staring out from those big eyes of hers. She was looking at his nipple, focused, drawn to it. Like his nipple was a necessity. Her lips shaped themselves to take it in, to suck it, lick it. Bite it!

Shit! Her sharp teeth startled him and he had to bite his tongue to keep from yelping.

She was tapped into them, in tune with her nature. They had roused the sleeping tiger. His nipple throbbed. So did his cock. It grew two inches when her teeth sank in. She turned her head, frantic now, seeking the other nipple. He wanted to drag her down to the floor and nip and growl and lick.

Adam, at least, kept a cool head. They had a delicate balance to maintain. They had to soften Marie's self-control enough to let the tiger peek out, without allowing it to blaze uncontrolled and consume her. He moved in and distracted her.

"Here sweetheart, let's get you out of this hot towel."

Marie looked up at Adam, confused, like she was waking up from a daydream. Her buttered fingers curled into fists.

Adam tugged the towel free, and those gorgeous breasts were there. Ean dropped to his knees. Marie turned to face him. His mouth was open. His tongue was probably hanging out. They had to be the most lickable breasts in all of creation. He lifted them reverently. He savored the weight of them in his palms and licked his lips, anticipating.

"No," Adam told him.

"No?"

Ean wanted to weep. He looked at Adam, pleading.

*Focus.* Adam had spread the towel over the kitchen table.

Marie's hands were in Ean's hair, her fingers locked tight in his curls, greasing them and he didn't care. Her nipples were hard erect nubs, drawn so tight it had to hurt.

"Lick my nipples, Ean," Marie pleaded. Her voice deepened, husky with passion. "Bite them."

He groaned. His thumbs stroked back and forth over them.

"Please, Ean." He kissed her bellybutton instead, gave in to the temptation to lick it, then got to his feet and swung her up in his arms.

"Let's get you comfortable first." He carried her to the table. Shyness forgotten, she lay back on the towel, knees bent. Ean felt dizzy and it wasn't from the wine.

Adam leaned over above her head, taking her hands and bringing them to her breasts. "Here, love, coat your breasts, just like the bowl."

She frowned, shaking her head as if she could clear the mists so easily. She pressed her knees together.

Adam cupped her hands and turned her palms to rest against her nipples. “Trust me. Doesn’t that feel nice?”

His fingers tightened, bringing her little hands around her pale mounds, sliding her palms slick and warm over her nipples. She was catching on, giving in. Her head dropped back on the towel, her legs parted, ready for a lover, while she squeezed and stroked ripe breasts. She squirmed and wriggled. So did Ean’s cock. She rolled pink nipples between her fingers. Ean’s tongue throbbed.

His attention wandered lower, drawn to her pussy, creamy white with a pink blush, a little cleft down the center oozed sweet nectar. LET ME LICK HER! His mind screamed.

*When she is screaming to be licked, then you can lick her. For now, we butter and we dip.*

Well okay then.

He left the buttering to Adam. Ean turned his attention to dipping. He got a bowl of chilled fruit from the fridge, pausing there, letting cool air flow out and fan over his chest. The bowl was cold in his hands. He wanted to rub his cheek against it, feel the cold ease the fever in his blood. He resisted the urge and passed the bowl to Adam.

Chocolate bubbled viscous and sweet in its cauldron. Ean breathed in the vapor—rich, dark, mysterious. He counted on it to bring all those things bubbling to the surface in Marie. He dipped a finger in to test the temperature. Stingy hot, but not scalding.

When Ean turned back, it was to see Marie’s fingers sliding over the plump lips of her pussy, pulling, pinching with Adam coaxing next to her ear and bringing her nipples to a delicious rosy peak by rubbing the tips with a chilled strawberry. “Perfect, wouldn’t you say?”

“Perfection,” Ean agreed.

Marie stared up at Adam, apprehensive, suddenly aware of the path their thoughts were traveling.

“You can’t,” she whispered. Her pupils flared wider.

“Trust me.” Adam looked at her, a look that didn’t waver, a look that promised, a look that tempted. “You will love this more than we will.”

Ean saw the soft tremor of her stomach, her skin so pale and satin smooth. He started to hum, the song popping into his head before he thought it out, wanting to lighten the mood.

She frowned and then her face lit. “Purple Rain.”

“Chocolate rain,” Ean corrected.

“Nooo,” she protested with a laugh even as she let her head drop back again, giving him full view and access to those lovely breasts. She didn’t lose eye contact or protest further as Ean lifted the spoon high above her body and let the first droplets hiss down. Hot, velvet rain sprinkled over her quivering breasts. Her stomach tightened, she twisted and then relaxed, looking a little startled at how quickly the heat vanished. The second time her eyes got more of a smoldering come-and-lick-me look.

Ean watched the gold sparks in her eyes flare, expand, merge. The dark pupils narrowed and

lengthened. Ean lost the words, lost the function of his tongue.

Adam put his hand on Marie's stomach, just above her navel. He massaged in a small circular motion with his palm. "Stay with me, love. Look at me."

Marie's eyes shifted back and the breath Ean had been struggling to take whooshed into his lungs.

Adam bowed over her and his tongue dove to catch a rivulet of chocolate on his tongue. Then he moved up, smearing the chocolate over Marie's lips, pressing his mouth to hers. She moaned.

Ean dipped a strawberry in chocolate and traced a circle around each nipple, letting the cold fruit and hot chocolate set up a maddening contrast. Adam straightened, edged closer to Ean, dipped the spoon and drizzled sinful heat into her bellybutton, providing them with a dipping pool.

"Please," she whispered.

Adam picked up an orange slice and rubbed it, cold and dripping juice, right over her clit. She gasped and jerked, her legs clamping shut around his arm. Her eyes had a wild look, like she didn't know if she was trying to keep him out or keep him right there.

How far could they push her? How close to the edge could they play?

"Open for me," Adam whispered.

She did.

Adam dipped his orange in the bowl where the chocolate was still hot and silky smooth, his hand moved back between her legs while his eyes held her fast in his will. She sucked a breath and whimpered when the drips hit her clit.

Ean could see juices flow from her pussy. Hot. Fragrant. He felt drunk.

"Please," she cried.

*She nearly got loose on us once*, Ean thought, and wondered if Adam was listening.

Adam fed her the slice of orange. Her lips parted, chocolate dripped on them, her tongue slipped out licking at the orange first, a slow savoring stroke that set Ean's cock twitching. Then gently her teeth closed over the fruit and she sucked it into her mouth. The slice disappeared with a dainty slurp.

She licked her lips.

Ean licked his.

Ean stood between her legs. He couldn't say how he got there. She looked up at him and moaned, "Please, Ean."

Adam unbuttoned his shirt, pulled it from his waistband. "Tell him, Marie." He shrugged his shoulders and the shirt slid off, falling to the floor in a cotton whisper. "Tell him what you want."

Her mouth opened but no words came. Ean thought he would lose his mind waiting.



Adam lifted a peach slice from the bowl and ran it over his own nipple. Marie watched, hypnotized, her eyes following the peach, widening as his nipple hardened. Her tongue moistened her lips.

“Tell him.”

Adam dipped the peach in chocolate, arching his back, sucking in his own breath when hot chocolate met skin. Adam looked from his nipple to Marie.

“Lick me, Ean,” she whispered.

Then louder as Adam moved closer. “Please lick me, Ean.”

Ean’s knees connected with the tile.

When he nuzzled between her thighs they clamped around his head like a vise. He heard her sob, “Yes, oh yes. Lick me.”

He could feel those two words beat like a pulse through the blood in her veins. Lick me.

He could feel them throb inside her pussy when he dipped his tongue inside. Lick me.

He felt them hum in her clit, rising under his tongue, reaching for him when he drew back to blow softly. *Lick me!*

Ean wrapped an arm around each thigh and held her down, kept her focused on his tongue, while Adam let her have his nipples.

Her thighs tightened their clamp on Ean’s head. Her pussy pressed upward filling his nose with heady scent, spilling nectar on his tongue, making everything but her need fall away. The whole world became that straining drive inside her, reaching out to him, sliding down the length of his tongue.

He cupped her with it, letting her rub her little cunt along his hot raspy muscle, feeling her pace pick up as the pleasure mounted.

His face was soaked. Dripping. Hot. Sticky.

His fingers spread out over her hips. He could feel her thrusting up to him, mindless, free, feral. He kept her there, channeling the energy that could shift her from one body to another through his own and back into his drive to give her pleasure.

She twisted away from Adam’s chest and cried out, “No, no, no...”

Ean drove his tongue down inside her, ramming her with it as she twisted under him, straining to escape. He could feel her strong muscles clamping hard around him while she cried, “No.” He understood. Part of her, the human part of her, still struggled against the feline and fought against abandon. Feared it.

Adam joined his hand to hers and Ean reached for her other hand, not losing his place. Her fingers dug into the back of his hand. He and Adam held her tight, the three of them bound by a promise only their bodies could voice.

Adam pushed her hair from her face with his free hand. "It's okay. We've got you."

Still she resisted until her whole body shook with the effort. Just as Ean wondered if the effort might shatter her, the orgasm broke through. She sat up halfway and Adam held her hard against him, her face hidden against his chest while Ean kept pleasure shuddering through her.

Ean held his mouth over her pussy as she settled and went still, holding warmth there for her like a blanket, letting her ease back to conscious thought while aftershocks shivered through her every few seconds.

Adam kissed her and she looked down at Ean like she was seeing him for the first time. She sent him a smile that made him go warm inside. He was pleased that she was pleased.

She wriggled free of them and sat up, her feet dangling over the edge of the table, her chin tucked to her chest. "I'm all sticky," she said. "Give me a minute to wash up." She darted between them and was out of sight before either could respond.

Ean went to the sink, twisted the tap and stood watching the water jet out. Adam tossed a dishtowel on the counter, which reminded Ean he'd come to wash his face. He splashed the water, wishing he could keep the scent of her with him but that was another socially unacceptable instinct he had to quell. When he was cleaned up he grabbed his wine and followed Adam to the dining room.

They sat and sipped spiced wine that had gone cold.

"She's getting dressed," Adam said.

"I hear."

"She's going to run."

Ean nodded. "I expected she would."

Adam took a sip of wine and shifted in his chair, as if trying to find a comfortable angle. Ean pushed the discomfort of his own erection from his mind and concentrated on the Marie problem.

"She's kept that tiger in her on one hell of a short leash for a long time."

"She's just decided to move her into a concrete vault."

Ean nodded. They heard the front door whisper open and close behind her. She must be barefoot. A few seconds later the car started.

Adam rubbed his temples like he was trying to keep a headache at bay.

"We can't tell her who she is, Adam."

"I know."

Ean set his mug on the table. In the hall, the grandfather clock chimed the noon hour. As if they needed a reminder that time was slipping away from them.

“Plan B?”

Adam dropped his hands with a sigh. “Plan B.”

## Chapter Two

Shame heated Marie’s cheeks, made snide little comments in undertones at the back of her mind, a derisive drip, drip, drip that she wished she could argue with.

She used to cringe when women at the office gossiped about fantasies and daring sexual escapades, phone sex or cyber sex.

And there was nothing virtual about what she had done. What she had done would shock them. What she had done with two men, letting them drizzle her with chocolate and lap it up. She pressed her legs together and grasped the pillowcase in a tight fist, remembering Ean’s tongue, that raspy heat.

A message light blinked on the answering machine, a red flash pulsing in the predawn black. Her clit throbbed and pulsed with that same glowing urgency. She turned her back to the phone and whacked at a lump in her pillow.

Her body hummed with a need to go back. One dip into the sweet sensual pool that was Adam and Ean together was no easier to turn away from than turning from a box of candy after one piece. Her mouth watered for them. More than her mouth was moist and craving them. Heat flashed in the tight pocket between her legs and she clenched against the need quivering there.

And that was why she couldn’t go back. Once wasn’t enough and could lead to one man not being enough. She knew too well how an out-of-control craving could destroy her life.

She felt a tugging where the corner of her blanket disappeared over the futon’s edge. Her pet rabbit hopped onto the futon and a fluffy splash of white moved across the red wool blanket. Lilly’s pink nose wiggled and her ears flopped up and down until she found an opening at the blanket’s edge and burrowed in against Marie’s warmth. Marie cupped her hand over the baby rabbit, feeling the tiny life pulse warm and quick there against her stomach. Tension uncoiled and her body softened with love. She tried to focus on the love and not dwell on the ache that lurked beneath the surface.

Her fingers ran through silky fur and the vision of a tiny head with baby fine hair flickered and went out in her mind. Cupping Lilly’s fragile body in the palm of her hand, she turned her belly up. Her finger stroked over the quivering belly and she felt Lilly going groggy and limp under her touch. Complete trust was humbling.

She tried to give that to Adam. She had tried today.

She had never expected the punch of connection that shot between her and Ean. She had not expected that his voice could stroke through her body and hypnotize her as surely as she hypnotized the bunny. She swallowed hard at the memory of going soft and wet under Ean’s gaze.

To preserve what she had with Adam meant she had to stay far, far, far from Ean.

A soft knock at the door made her wish she could burrow under her warm blanket and hide in the dark

with Lilly. It would be Adam. The blue face of the alarm clock marked the time as 5:00 a.m. No one else would call at this hour.

She tossed the blanket aside. Chill bumps sprang up on her arms. A white tank top and white lace panties were more clothes than he preferred her wearing and might as well be nothing in the morning chill. She scooped the bunny up and carried her cradled just below her breasts, flipping on the light with her free hand.

She opened the door to stare into the cosmic swirl of Ean's eyes. Her stomach responded with an excited flutter. He leaned against the doorframe.

It was freezing outside yet he wore jeans and a blue flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up. She was thinking he should have a jacket and then recalled just how hot his skin felt pressed against hers. Maybe it was better to keep him as cool as possible.

"You should at least ask who it is." He stepped in and past her before she could overcome her surprise and find words to send him away. "Why isn't there a peephole in that door?"

She shivered and shut the door. "I'm not yours to worry over, Ean."

It came out sounding crankier than she intended. He whirled, his lips pursed briefly, but he let the rudeness go without comment.

He had a notebook, a thick, brown document-sized envelope and a fat manila folder tucked under one arm. Seeing her attention go there, he deposited his bundle on the coffee table. He fished in his pocket and added a flash drive to the stack.

"Homework for you, Marie. I'm sorry about the early hour but time is critical and we can't keep wasting it." He turned around, taking in her one-room efficiency in a half-turn.

Marie flinched inwardly, aware of the couch still folded out as her bed, the tangled blankets and sheets. They would still be warm from her body.

Ean looked back to her, his eyes wide, shock evident. "Why do you live here instead of Adam's house?"

She lifted one shoulder and looked away. "I like my space."

"You like your space?" Ean did another turn. "What space?"

In her arms the bunny scrabbled furiously. Marie hugged her tighter.

"Okay, I don't want to intrude on his space." She twisted away from Ean and carried Lilly to her box in the corner. "Go home, Ean. I'm not in the mood for this and it's too early for whatever that is." She jabbed a finger toward the papers teetering in an unruly stack.

Ean dropped onto her bed, elbows on knees, fingertips steepled, his chin resting on the tips of his thumbs, contemplating.

"This doesn't make sense, Marie."

Marie fussed with Lilly, picking cedar chips from her food dish. She didn't answer, she couldn't answer. She could feel the quiver of emotion just there in her throat. One word would give it all away.

He moved so softly she didn't know he was there until she felt his warmth behind her, his arms gently encircling her, his breath against her face. He nudged back her hair. Anticipation sent a shiver through her. He covered the side of her face with a wet, sloppy lick.

The effect was like a dousing with ice water. She jumped up so fast they banged heads and she backed away from him, rubbing hers. "What is wrong with you?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it." He looked embarrassed.

"Look, Ean, this thing with you and Adam isn't going to work. Just go home, okay?"

He moved toward her again and she kept retreating, swiping at the wet spot on her cheek with the back of her hand.

"Why can't it work? I know you like me." He backed her against the refrigerator. "And I know you like being licked."

That comment started a tingling in the lips of her pussy. A wet trickle dampened her panties. She ducked, bracing for another sloppy lick, but he simply kissed the top of her head.

She tried pushing at his chest and wound up thinking about how broad it was, a sprinkling of red gold hair across it. He had big firm nipples. She ran her tongue over her teeth, remembering the rubbery feeling of a nipple against it, rolling the hard nub between her teeth when they clamped down.

*This had to stop!*

She pushed him harder and he leaned back, looking down at her with a warm, I-want-you look. She cleared her throat.

"You'll understand why this can't work when you're a little older."

The barb didn't work. The tip of his index finger slid along her collarbone. "Your nipples get hard when I lick you."

She looked down at the two dark circles rising to hard peaks under her thin shirt. He scooped her up in his arms then and headed for the bed. Heat radiated through his cotton shirt. Her knees hooked over one strong muscled arm while his other curved around her shoulders. The need to press her face into his neck and breathe in his scent was nearly overwhelming. She had to bite down on her tongue to resist tasting, right there where his Adam's apple bobbed.

"Now see, this is exactly what I mean. Put me down, Ean. Carrying me without my permission is immature." She'd meant to sound stern. It came out wobbling and breathy.

He snorted. He did put her down on the futon and sank to his knees beside it. He had that odd look in his eyes again.

"If you lick me I will cut your tongue out!"

He licked his lips instead and glanced around. “We’re getting off track here.”

There was another knock at the door.

“Adam,” Ean said, even as she thought it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Adam waited until she had one cup of coffee and half a bagel down before launching into an explanation. They were sitting on her bed, her in the middle.

Marie was still trying to absorb the basics. “You’re telling me that the three of us carry a rare genetic trait. That I have mirror image chromosomes?”

Ean hadn’t paved the way for Adam’s revelations. The hungry look on Ean’s face told him all he needed to know on the subject of paving. He could still feel the heat of Marie’s arousal emanate like an aura from her body. It scented the air and made him long to peel off his clothes and do some paving of his own. He had a genetics lesson to get through first.

“It’s more about genetics than you’ll want to know, but you have what we call ZW chromosomes. Ean and I have ZZ.”

He wondered if he should have waited longer. When was the best time to tell her any of the details they had to share? If she had been raised among her own kind, she would have grown into who she was like every other child. But she had been raised thinking she was human and Ean was probably right, too much information at this point was not good. So they tried to frame things in as acceptable a manner as possible.

“And fertility cycles once every seven years?”

He nodded. “All indicators suggest that you should be ready for conception this weekend.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, hugging herself. “This still doesn’t explain why it takes both of you to conceive.”

She pushed up to her feet and paced around the small room. Adam could see the cat peeking out through smooth fluid motion.

“I understand what you have been through, Marie. I know this is painful. I wouldn’t bring it up if I didn’t believe it would put a baby in your arms.”

She ran her hands through her hair, pushing it from her face. “I know. I know.” She pivoted to face them, hands on hips. The movement lifted her breasts and thrust them forward. “I know that. But I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Your biological parents would have carried these same traits.” He could have bit his tongue off as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

“I was abandoned and adopted later by my foster parents. My biological parents were never—”

Adam watched the realization settle in, that somehow her parents would have had to overcome the same

obstacles, meaning she had two biological fathers and a mother. He didn't want her dwelling on all the questions and revelations that bit of knowledge led to. He looked to Ean for a rescue.

"It's not research that gets much publicity," Ean said. "Can you imagine the media madness that would spring up around a study like this?"

Her lips pursed and she turned back to her pacing. Adam had a swirling, sinking feeling in his stomach, like water going down a drain. All the unspoken details left him feeling dirty. But if he told her she was genetically both human and tiger she would throw them both out. He could shift her and then there would be no denial, but what would the shock do to her psychologically? Not to mention how she would react when she'd been shifted into a tiger that could kill a man with the swipe of her paw or the snap of powerful jaws?

"If it's so rare, then how do you know it will work?" She was looking right at him, demanding truth with those gold-dusted blue eyes of hers. *We will not go down*, he promised himself. *I'll find a way to make this up to her*. He took a deep breath and let the exhale carry the half-truth out of his mouth.

"Because I have patients in my fertility study with those traits and they have conceived. The males have—forgive the terminology—what's called a sneaky gene. The plasma membrane does not break down and allow bonding with the egg after penetration, but when the egg is penetrated by a second sperm from another ZZ male, some missing catalyst, which I don't fully understand, allows the membranes to break down and bonding occurs."

"And because," Ean added, "it worked for my wife."

Adam rushed to move them away from the dangerous direction Ean's admission could take them. "I didn't realize you carried the trait until you agreed to give me a control sample for my studies. Which, I might add, was long after we were lovers and I had fallen in love with you."

Adam rose and went to her, pulling her into a hug. She was shivering, though her skin felt warm against him. He noticed the slightest tremor to her lower lip. She believed. He held her tighter.

"I added your chart to the database and ran the routine searches on it. The marker is rare and the program gives a warning. I ran the blood tests again with extreme attention to detail, with new samples from you. When I got the same results I asked you to let me monitor your fertility cycles. I called Ean in for a second opinion when I saw the signs that ovulation was imminent."

Marie pulled away from Adam and sat in the rocking chair across from the couch, hugging herself again. He could feel the shock of it all creeping through her like cold wind. He felt the urge in Ean to go to her and warned him back. Her private thoughts reaffirmed his decision to go forward with this story. He had to do this for her.

"So why didn't you call on me for an opinion?" Marie asked.

*Impossible*, her mind whispered. *After all this time? After I finally accepted that I will never carry a child? Do I dare hope?*

"I advised against it," Ean said. "My experience as a doctor, and my emotional distance allowed me to counsel Adam. He was too close to you to be objective."

Marie rocked back and forth, gently, almost imperceptibly, trying to comfort herself. "You thought there

was a medical reason to deceive me? Or was it that you..." her voice thickened, stumbled on the words, "that you wanted to size up your prospects before you offered help?" She tugged the t-shirt hem, pulling it lower on her thighs.

"Marie!" Adam couldn't keep frustration from crackling in his voice. The fragile confidence he'd seen blossom in her during the past year crumbled around Ean. "Ease up. This isn't easy for Ean either. Leah died before she gave birth."

Her eyes widened. Grief tugged at her attention. Adam noticed her body sway as if their emotion were a solid, physical force. Could she tell it flowed from two sources? Under stress Marie's instincts rose to the surface. When she learned to control them she would be more than a match for him, she'd be the challenge he craved. He wasn't ready for that challenge today.

"I'm sorry, Ean," she said, head bowed.

"No, I want you to say what you're thinking. I want us to trust each other that much."

Adam cringed inside at the word trust. If she was angry now, what was going to happen when she discovered how much truth they danced around when they were asking her to trust them? Ean went to her now, knelt beside her chair, one hand on her knee.

"You have been through years of failed treatments, had your marriage destroyed by it. I've never been through a divorce but I know what it's like to have your dreams snatched away. I wanted to have facts when we discussed this with you. You didn't need false hope. Neither did I."

He touched the side of her face and waited until she looked into his eyes. "Yesterday you gave me back my laugh. You made me feel more alive than I have in months. Whatever else happens is a bonus. If it doesn't happen, I'm okay with that too."

Ean turned halfway, grabbed a folder from the scattered papers on the coffee table, took out a picture and sat cross-legged at Marie's feet.

"This is Leah." His face was soft with love when he offered her the photograph.

Adam had memorized that picture in the months following her death. Leah looked about five months pregnant in the picture and her curly blond hair was blown back from her face. Stretched out beside her was Ean in tiger form with his head in her lap.

Marie put a hand on Ean's arm. "She was beautiful, Ean. She looks happy and brave." Ean looked puzzled.

Adam cut in. "The tiger was a pet, quite tame, raised by the family they stayed with. Ean sent me that picture from India." More half-truths. He put a hand to his stomach.

"I can't imagine letting a tiger put its head in my lap." Marie handed the picture back. "I don't care how tame the owners insist it is."

"She loved adventure. She wanted to take a trip, see a bit of the world before the birth," Ean explained. "I had volunteered to do some work for Doctors Without Borders. I took her along."

Marie put her arms around Ean and leaned her head against his. "Ean, you lost so much."



“You need to know,” Ean’s voice deepened, his Adam’s apple rose and fell on a swallow. “I need you to know. This thing with you, this bond growing between the three of us, is not about trying to get Leah back.”

Adam rose and joined Ean at her feet. Marie put a hand on his shoulder and he covered it with his own. For a small space of time it was enough to sit connected without words between the three of them.

Then Marie stood up. Adam couldn’t help the way his gaze wandered up her legs to the round curve of her bottom, a soft jiggle there when she stepped away and bent to retrieve another half a bagel. Adam risked a glance at Ean and saw his tongue go out and curl back in, his gaze following the same path as Adam’s.

When she started to turn, they both glanced hastily about for some safe place to put their attention. Adam wound up watching her take a thoughtful bite of bagel, her white teeth clamping down. He felt his nipples contract. His temperature rose and so did his cock. He had to concentrate. He was supposed to be the voice of reason here.

“I don’t know what to think of all this,” she said, waving a hand at all the charts and data he’d shown her.

“Don’t think,” Ean said.

Both she and Adam frowned at him.

“No, really.” Ean stretched his legs and rose to stretch his hands above his head bumping the ceiling when he did. “Trust us. Take a leap of faith. We do this, and if it works we have the miracle we’ve longed for. If it doesn’t, we had love and pleasure.”

Adam wished Ean would quit tossing the word “trust” at her. Marie looked from Ean to the heap of research. She was completely capable of discovering and understanding a few genetic details they hadn’t mentioned yet. He had to admit Ean’s way might be the best.

“He’s right.”

Ean’s eyebrows rose and his jaw dropped.

Marie laughed. “I could get used to having you two around.” She touched her fingertips to Ean’s chin. He snapped his mouth shut. Naturally, that didn’t last long.

“He’s never said that before,” Ean said.

“We should just let nature have her way with us,” Adam continued. “Not overthink this.”

Ean put an arm around Marie and whispered, “Don’t fall over. He’ll snap back to himself in a minute or two.”

“We should let it take its course with one exception,” Adam said. “No sex.”

“Isn’t that going to make conception a little difficult?” Marie asked.

“So now you want sex?” Ean looked really happy about that.

“Focus. Both of you. We spend time together, even sleep together, let all the pheromones do their thing, but no sex. By Saturday we should all be so ready that awkwardness won’t be an issue.”

“Define sex,” Ean said.

Marie grinned. With the pressure off it seemed she was already relaxing and starting to enjoy them.

“Marie, you should pack a few things, bring your rabbit along, stay with us a few days. Ean, maybe you could put together a picnic and the two of you go for a boat ride one day this week, spend a little time together.”

“I haven’t agreed to all this,” Marie pointed out.

“Have you decided against it?”

She shrugged and paced. “You want me to go off with the two of you, make a baby, and we will magically live happily ever after?”

Adam almost said people do it all the time, but that was in a world Marie had yet to discover.

“Why not?” Ean asked.

“It’s just so backwards, inside out and upside down from the way this is supposed to be.”

Adam caught an ankle as she passed and tumbled her into his lap. His cock strained upward under her wiggling body, like a compass needle seeking north. Her wicked grin told him she knew what she was up to. She was soft, warm, aroused. It was going to be a long week.

“I wish I could promise you the fairytale ending, love.” He hoped she wouldn’t feel trapped in a horror story when she found out what they were.

“We’ll make this work,” Ean said. He put his arms around her too.

*This is just how it is supposed to be, Adam thought, two of us to shelter and protect, her safely in the middle.* If he had been in India with Ean and Leah instead of here wrapping up a ten-year research project, would he have made the difference? Could he have sensed the coming danger and saved Leah and their babies?

He pushed the weight of that guilt away. He’d made the mistake once of thinking they had all the time in the world.

\* \* \* \* \*

The canoe sliced through the water as easily as shafts of sunlight sliced through the naked trees. Marie tried not to think about naked anything. Ean could have done the paddling by himself and he was the driving force. Her own graceless stabs at the water probably hindered more than helped but she needed to keep her hands and mind busy.

Fingers of cold wind brushed her cheeks and ran through her hair. She wasn’t a nature sort of girl. She

enjoyed a walk in the park or a romantic picnic on a summer afternoon. But the river and the wind and a blustery autumn day made her crave a warm fireside and a good book to hide in.

She took comfort in the fact that at least outside she could wear layers of clothes. Adam and Ean might be comfortable strutting around the house in their birthday suits but Marie wasn't. If they expected naked she was going to have to work out more. She compromised and wore one of Adam's shirts, unbuttoned to appease them, but she kept it pulled close and wrapped around her when she sat.

Added to her own self-consciousness was her reaction to the sight of naked male everywhere she looked. Her hormones were on overdrive and her temper short. She had an insatiable urge to bite something, bite something firm like a nipple, or pliant like...

"Heads down," Ean shouted and she ducked in time to miss a low-hanging branch as they skimmed close to the shore to avoid some large rocks.

Up ahead the water had a foamy, threatening look. She risked turning to look back at Ean. "Is that rapids up ahead?"

"Yeah!" Ean whooped.

"Oh joy," Marie muttered.

"Pull your paddle in. I'll steer us through it."

Marie watched the water boil under the bow, or stern, or starboard, or whatever you called the front of a boat. Her stomach churned harder than the water. The motion sickness she had managed to keep in check with positive thoughts and chewing gum kicked into full gear. She knew she needed to look straight ahead, try to keep her eyes level with the horizon, concentrate on the wind on her face. She couldn't tear her eyes from the riffles and eddies, or the shadowy shapes of large rocks lurking just below the surface.

When she managed to look back to Ean for reassurance that death wasn't imminent, he was laughing, dipping his paddle first on one side, then on the other, fully absorbed in the task.

She faced forward just as they caught the edge of a whirlpool that spun them around full circle before spitting them out the other side. Marie clutched the sides of the canoe and closed her eyes.

Behind her Ean whooped and laughed. This was so good for him. She'd caught that somber look that crept over him when he thought no one was watching. He still grieved but she knew this time with her and Adam had moved him back to living and hoping again.

Her head was spinning and her stomach was rolling over and over. She called up all she learned about breath and concentration in yoga class. She would not throw up and spoil the fun. She opened her eyes, the whole world was heaving like a tilt-a-whirl. The horizon leaned hard left, then right.

*Deep breaths. Deep breaths. Moan. Deep breaths .*

And then, mercifully, they were through the rough patch. Marie knew she should pick up her paddle. It was going to take Ean with the Jaws of Life to release the grip she had on the sides of the canoe. Her stomach and brain were still pitching and rolling. Even now, the gentle roll of the river had the same effect on her as waves on the high seas.

“This is the spot where we leave the canoe,” Ean called.

“There is a God,” she whispered. Despite the cool air, she could taste sweat when she licked her dry lips. Marie wanted to signal Ean she heard, but movement, even turning her head to smile, was just too risky. Just a few more lurching swells to bounce across as he turned the boat sideways and they slid into the sandy shore. Ean jumped out and came forward, splashing.

She smiled at him through gritted teeth and hoped it might fool him. She reached for the hand he held out. The boat shifted to the right when she rose. Her brain shifted left and instead of stepping gracefully out onto solid ground, jelly knees wobbled under her and pitched her over the side, legs and arms flailing. She saw Ean’s eyes go wide and his mouth drop open just before ice water filled her ears, sent burning fingers up her nose and closed over her face.

### Chapter Three

“Adam will kill me,” Ean muttered.

And when he pulled Marie up, streaming water and mud, he thought he might beat Adam to it. River mud coated her back and clung to her hair. She grabbed fistfuls of his shirt, rested her forehead against his chest and stood shivering. He could see the chill bumps on her arms, just above her wrists where her soggy jacket slid back toward her elbows. Her hands were cold enough to freeze water. He put one arm around her shoulders and bent to put another just behind her knees.

“No!” The desperation, the tightening of her hands on his shirt, had him leaning back and stooping to look into her face. Normally pale-skinned, she had taken pale to a new level. Her eyes were scrunched shut and her teeth had a death grip on her lower lip.

“You hurt?”

“Motion sickness,” she gasped between pants. “I need a minute.”

He pried the fingers of her right hand from his shirt and massaged her wrist. He felt the soft ticking beat of her pulse beneath his fingertips and then pressed his index finger into a pressure point.

“It’s okay if you want to stand back,” she said through chattering teeth. “I’m a mess and there’s no sense in you risking wearing my breakfast home.” She opened her eyes. Her gaze traveled from his face to the water swirling around her knees. How was it she managed to get paler? Her teeth dug into that lower lip again.

“I’m not going anywhere.” He tried distracting her. “Here, see this pressure point I’m holding? Use your other hand and keep pressure there.”

Marie followed his direction and he scooped her up. She fussed at him but held the breakfast she threatened to lose. He set her in the grass at the shore and pretended cheer he didn’t feel when he turned back to the boat. He worked fast, grabbing a small daypack from the boat and pulling it up onto the beach. Then he scooped up Marie again and headed for the barn where he had intended to spend a lazy, romantic couple of hours with her before heading back. Making her sick and nearly drowning her were definitely negatives on the wooing scale.

She was a cold, soggy lump in his arms. He needed to get her out of the wind.

“I can walk, Ean. You’ll put your back out carrying me.”

“You’re a featherweight.”

“Oh, right.”

Ean lost the rest of what she said when an alarming scent caught his attention just where the trail started to thread through the forest. He tilted his head, nostrils flaring. Dogs had scent-marked a tree there. A few yards further along he saw a red and white label beer can atop the leaves and wrinkled his nose at the scent of human urine. Two men, Ean decided.

Adam owned several hundred acres on both sides of the river. The perimeter was fenced and posted. Whoever came in would have come by river where signs marked the property as private, so there was no mistaking they were trespassing. Hunters. They were a constant annoyance this time of year.

His heart raced. While they wouldn’t be hunting tigers or men, instinct was difficult to reason with. Getting Marie to a safe place that he could defend became a need hammering in his chest. He picked up his pace.

Marie put her arms around his neck. “I’m okay, Ean. You don’t have to run.”

“This is barely a stroll. When I go fast I’m a blur.”

“I love your modesty.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Windburn heated Marie’s cheeks. She pressed her hands to them, as if those little spots of heat could warm her frozen fingers. After the rush through the woods, with the wind singing in her ears, stepping into the barn was like stepping into the hush of a library. In the distance, the sound of baying—hounds on the trail of some poor creature—made her shiver.

“Son of a…” Ean kicked and shoved at the great door.”Grrr.”

Rusted wheels screeched in the track, then gave. The whole thing slid home with a shudder, shutting out the wind and the light.

Marie was halfway up the ladder to the loft by then and she heard Ean moving quickly toward her, unhindered by darkness or unfamiliar surroundings. Cat eyes, her father had called it. Ean, it seemed, shared her uncanny ability to find her way in the dark.

The loft window was shuttered, blocking the meadow view and sunshine along with the wind, just as surely as Ean meant to block out her thoughts of Adam. Light leaked in around the edges, bathing the hay-strewn floor in a sleepy twilight glow.

She turned to see Ean peeling wet jeans down muscled thighs, his cock thick and bobbing with his movements. He wasn’t wasting any time.

He looked up to catch her staring.

Heat rose, blooming from her center and spreading out over her skin. She didn't want it. It consumed her anyway. Her teeth stopped chattering and her mouth turned to desert, too dry for a swallow. Her eyes were glued to the dark curls framing his cock. Her stomach clenched. Her tongue throbbed. God, she wanted to lick him!

He looked down at his rigid cock and back at her. "I'm not going to be able to do much about that. Just ignore it."

Ignore it? Ignore the elephant in the hayloft, or rather the elephant's trunk. Was he serious?

"We need to get you out of those clothes. Peel them off and you can have my dry ones."

She couldn't look away. A silver thread of desire dripped from the tip of his cock. Her tongue slid over her lips.

"Marie?"

"Um, yeah. Take off my wet things." She fumbled with buttons and zippers. He did a bad job of pretending not to watch her strip.

He shrugged out of his down vest as well as his flannel and undershirt. She clamped her tongue tight between her teeth and forced her eyes to his bellybutton. Her tongue still throbbed. She wanted to lick him there too and follow the softly furred path lower. Marie's hand shook when she reached for his clothes. His fingers closed around hers.

"Nope. I get to do the honors." First, he pulled her close enough to feel the heat radiating from his body and then he used his t-shirt and rubbed her hair as dry as he could before helping her into his shirt. His scent was like a drug. The fabric was soft and still warm from his body. It teased and tented over her hard nipples when he drew edges together to fasten the first button. His knuckles grazed her collarbone and her body responded with a tightening and a hot trickle between her thighs. She watched his fingers work lower, slip each small white button into its proper hole. She squeezed her legs together, refusing to let that erotic symbolism rise up through the fog filling her mind.

Then his hot cock bumped her *there*, like an arrow landing on the bull's-eye. The head of his cock bounced right against the apex of her thighs and rested. His hands went still. He had to notice the fresh sticky heat. She held her breath, waiting for him to say something witty and break the spell.

She might suffocate before he gathered his wits enough to do so.

She put her hands over his. They were so hot. He would make a good masseur. He wouldn't need heat stones. He could just lay his hands over the tight spots and let the heat seep in and soothe away the tension. She thought how nice it would be to let go and soften under his touch. It would be heaven.

It would land her in an emotional hell.

She took a step back. "Tell you what, Ean. I'll ignore your elephant's trunk if you ignore my hot spring."

Ean, unlike Adam, was readable. She watched the thoughts paint themselves in expressions on his face. Total blank... To huh?... To ahhh...and ending on a sly smile that said exactly where he'd like to park

his trunk. Then he got that drowsy, unfocused look that swooped in and was halfway to a kiss before she figured out it was coming. His fingers scooped hair back from her face and her own fingers twined around the backs of his hands when he leaned in, gently bumped her nose with his own and teased her lips open with his tongue.

She let him. How could she not? She wanted that kiss, wanted the rough scrape of his tongue against hers, wanted his hard, hot chest pressed tight to her breasts where she could feel his heart beating next to her own. She wanted.

She opened. His tongue thrust hungrily in and out. She felt every thrust between her legs. A soft buzzing sensation spread from the soles of her feet to the top of her head. He pressed deeper. She heard her own whimper, a pathetic kittenish mew and didn't care. She sucked at his tongue.

She wanted. She wanted him in a primitive, animal way. She craved.

Craved more. Craved deeper.

Craved Ean.

Then he set her away from him, took a breath and nodded. "Okay."

While she stared up him, she could swear the gold flecks in his eyes coalesced until she was looking into black-slitted gold eyes. She closed her own and opened them again to find just gold-dusted blue and concern.

"Hey, you okay?"

She opened and closed her mouth, curled her fingers to fists and then opened them to press her palms against his chest. He'd been teasing her, a little sex play. She didn't tease back. She didn't laugh it off. It didn't feel like a game anymore. Something was happening. It was like a magnetic wind moving through her, pushing her toward...

Pushing her toward what? Ean would be the logical answer, but something else she couldn't name beckoned her. She gave her head a shake to clear it. "I don't know. I'm a little dizzy. Maybe a touch of the motion sickness is hanging on." That and the need to throw him in the hay and fuck him senseless.

"I'm a slug." His hand closed tightly around her fingers and he tugged her across the loft to where he'd dropped the pack. "There are blankets and food in here."

He bought her explanation. Another difference. Adam always knew. Adam wouldn't have let her slide. She found comfort there and clung to that difference between the men as if it was a life preserver, even as Ean led her into darker, more dangerous waters.

"Please don't fuss, Ean." And she might as well tell the wind not to blow. He soon had her tucked into a small fleece throw and was feeding her crackers and sweet hot tea.

His concern for her didn't diminish his own appetite. He wolfed down two sandwiches and at Marie's insistence followed those with the two he'd made for her. And all the while the vision of those gold eyes stayed in her mind. Those and another pair—black-slitted silver. It was a trick of her mind. She knew that. A symbol. What could it mean?

Ean was working tangles from her hair, threading his fingers through, catching knots and gently working them apart, a process that could take hours. But it kept his hands busy and helped her think of other things besides being under him here in the sweet hay, with him stroking in and out, hot, hard, steady... "This can't work." His fingers stilled. She shouldn't have just blurted that out.

"It has to work." He kissed her shoulder, a gentle brush of lips. "Why fight it?" Teeth lightly nipping emphasized his point. "We want to pleasure you." His tongue soothed the sting. "We can make you happy."

She sighed, wishing. She wanted to let go and enjoy. She couldn't.

"There is more to it than that, Ean. At least it is for me."

He didn't say anything. He leaned in and kissed the nape of her neck, let his tongue swirl there against the skin. Hot breath warmed the moist skin, whispered over it in a way that made a shiver slide down her spine and keep going down to her toes. He leaned over her shoulder and pressed his face to hers, nuzzling there, sliding his cheek back and forth against hers, and the magnetic wind came whistling back like a storm blowing in. Tumbling her thoughts like dry leaves. Snatching her breath.

"It is so much more, Marie." Lick, nuzzle. "You'll see how much more." Lick, nip. "Let go. Let us show you."

She tried to fight it. She snatched the first coherent thought she could find and voiced it. "I don't believe this whole genetics thing. It's so... farfetched."

His hands had moved from her hair down to her ribs. She hadn't noticed that drift until they tightened in a fierce grip. "We wouldn't lie to you. Only a monster would lie about something so important. You might not know me well but you know Adam."

His voice had a rough growling edge to it. It was his logic, more than the anger she stirred, that swayed her. She raised her hand to smooth her palm over his cheek, feeling the faint trace of stubble already coming back since his morning shave. Her breath came out in a sigh.

"I know. I know. It doesn't make sense. He wouldn't lie. But this is impossible."

"Courage, sweet," he murmured. "It takes courage to have a miracle. Grown men will run into a wall of flames to save a life but shrink in terror at the idea of a rose appearing out of thin air." He opened his palm in front of her to reveal a handful of golden petals. The unmistakable scent of roses perfumed the air.

Her heart did a quick sprint around her chest and fear prickled over her skin in the breath of time it took logic to still fear.

It was a trick, of course, but she couldn't help the smile shaping her lips and reaching down inside to warm her. A sweet trick. She stroked the petals, velvety soft. The perfume sweet, intoxicating, like Ean's voice. She turned her head and looked straight into those cosmic eyes.

"I'd choose the flames. I'm not brave enough to tackle magic roses."

"I am." His eyes didn't waver. He leaned close, his nose bumping hers playfully. He rubbed his face against hers again. His tongue teased her earlobe. A humming rose in her blood, almost a purr.



“Can you let me be brave for you, Marie?”

Could any woman have said no? He pressed her into the soft hay. Could any woman have pushed away those exploring fingers that found and pinched her nipples to peaks while his tongue filled her mouth and the scent of roses bloomed around her? Wouldn't any woman beg, like she did now?

“Lick my nipples, Ean. Bite them.”

He bit the buttons from his shirt instead, the one he'd wrapped her in. He plucked the first one free, held it between his teeth while he held her gaze and then blew it off into the hay, like a dart from a blowgun. His eyes fixed on hers. Then he dipped his head for the next, repeating the process. She felt the tug, heard the soft snap of rending threads and cloth. She watched him send another button flying. Hair tousled, face flushed with passion, his eyes glittered with a promise—a promise of passion, a promise of something not so civilized or proper.

When he had plucked the last button from the shirt, he paused, resting on his elbows, gazing into her eyes. She couldn't move, couldn't breathe under that stare. She shouldn't be doing this. They shouldn't.

“We're not supposed to have sex, Ean.”

Her mouth said one thing. Her body said something else. Her hands itched to explore him. She couldn't. She shouldn't.

She ignored her better judgment and found the courage to reach up, running a finger over his firm bottom lip. He captured her finger between his teeth and made a soft growling sound deep in his throat. Her pussy responded, clenching and growing slicker. He had to know what that growl did to her. The scent of her desire gave her away.

He released her finger and said, “We won't.”

He bent his head to her breasts and showered them with small, sharp nips. She squirmed. She hissed. She panted. If this wasn't sex, it was a flawless imitation. She needed to get away. Or, she needed to try. She pressed her hands against his shoulders, attempting to wriggle free, half hoping he wouldn't let her.

He didn't.

His tongue traced a small circle at the crest of her nipple. He filled it in with a hot, wet stroke. Then his teeth closed, drawing up skin, gently. He held her nipple captive while she squirmed, until she went still and lay under him panting and waiting. Then those teeth closed in a hard nip that had her arching under him. Making her gasp. Making her drip.

She could feel the length of his cock pressed between her sticky thighs, nudged tight against the folds of her pussy, sliding back and forth over her clit when she squirmed.

She could see them, see as if she was outside her body watching, his cock, the flared head glistening with her nectar. Her own sex, bright pink and glistening as well, the petals parting for his thick shaft, clinging as it rode back and forth over her swollen clit. Yet she was fully in her body, feeling that buzzing pleasure that started against his cock and hummed, resonating outward through every cell.

Mindsight. It was in her mind, but she knew what she saw was real.

She saw his balls swing and bump against the soft curve of her ass and she watched her own frantic ride. Juices glistened, clinging to fine dark hairs like dew.

She pressed tighter, working her hips and feeling his ridged cock bump back and forth over her clit. He caught her other nipple between his teeth and clamped down. Her head came up and she sank her teeth into his shoulder to stifle the snarl that ripped from her throat.

A climax stalked her, circled, ready to pounce.

His skin should be velvet soft there, right where it rubbed her pussy.

It burned. Hot enough to scorch.

Velvet rippling over a steel core. Would he feel that hot in her hand? She imagined squeezing him tight, her fingers curled around his cock, watching the flesh gather in folds against the circle of her thumb and finger when he drew back and smoothing when he thrust forward. He moaned as if she had done it.

He should feel like velvet.

His effect on her was more like the steady back and forth stroke of the finest sandpaper. A feathery scrape, scrape, scrape. It set her nerves vibrating and peeled away the thin varnish of propriety that clung tight long after she was ready to be done with it. Each scrape opened her more, made her raw, drove her to that wild dark place she craved and dreaded.

“No,” she cried. “No, no, no...” Her breath came in frantic little pants and her mind screamed stop, while her body desperately pushed on, sliding up and down his muscled flesh. Like an animal. Hungry. Starved.

She couldn't stop.

A dark cloud swirled up around her.

Fear warred with need. So close, the pleasure was so close. But so was the darkness, shifting, waiting to suck her away.

She had to stop.

She couldn't stop.

She clung to Ean, her teeth still clamped on his shoulder, like that might anchor her there against his hard, strong body. She came, the sensation like every cell in her body was exploding and she whimpered, clawed, fighting and spinning away all at once.

Ean's cock jerked between her thighs, hard spasms that sent his seed spilling over her bottom, her own juices flowing to mingle with his. So hot she wondered that they didn't scald him, soaking him while he came. That throaty growl resounded in her ears, like thunder first and then receding as she felt herself slipping away.

The magnetic wind had grown to a cyclone force and the darkness sucked at her. It felt like the two might tear her in half but the dark gained strength. She didn't want to go there, fought it with every ounce

of her will and it wasn't enough. She was going. She couldn't get back.

## Chapter Four

"Right here. I've got you," Adam called to her.

"Adam," she whimpered. "Adam?"

"Shh. Right here."

And he was. He was right beside her, kneeling in the straw. How?

Ean was kneeling on the other side, his face hidden in shadow. She shook her head. The spectral memory of her teeth sinking into to taut skin wouldn't leave. Reality sank in, slammed her awake and aware. A bloody tang lingered on the back of her tongue.

"Adam—I didn't mean..." Where had Adam come from? Had she been out that long? She could swear no more than a second blinked by between the time an orgasm ripped her from Ean's arms and Adam spoke to her.

"We didn't mean to," she said, struggling to sit. Adam fussed over her, smoothing her hair, brushing away bits of straw. How long had she been dreaming? It had to be a dream, a nightmare. Or, a nightmare come to life?

"We didn't mean it," she repeated.

Ean sat back on his heels, angled so the murky light revealed the bruise on his shoulder, a purple ring, blooming to red where the imprint of her teeth remained. Blood seeped from parallel scratches striping both arms. Cold crept from her belly into her lungs. She couldn't draw a breath. A dense weight settled low in her stomach.

"Ean?" Her hand trembled when she reached to touch him, sliding her finger along between two stripes as she tried to absorb that she could be capable of this. She touched his face, making him turn his head to look at her. "Ean?"

He nodded, possibly to reassure her, his breath coming short and shallow. But he didn't speak. And what could he say about...this? About her? He was looking at her like...like she was some kind of crazed animal. She felt crazy.

She glanced around. She needed her clothes and she needed to get out, get away from them.

A gun blast froze them all.

Feeling her way through disasters on a gut level usually served her better than reasoning through them. And that was why she was open to the doe when the blast came. It was like that hammering heart had lodged inside her own. A panic-fogged brain screamed run—run faster! But there was no electric sizzle knifing through her stomach, the kind she got when she allowed herself too close to another creature's suffering.

“She’s okay. He missed,” she said.

The continuing baying of hounds, faintly audible now, confirmed that they were still at the chase.

She’d closed her eyes when she heard the shot, to feel the result. And when she opened them, both men were staring at her.

She hadn’t meant to say that.

She had confirmed any suspicion that she was delusional. And maybe she was. Her skin prickled with dread as the baying continued. Not dread for the quarry. Dread for the three of them.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Adam had helped Marie down the ladder, Ean collapsed in the loft. He curled up on his side, closing his eyes and fighting nausea. He gritted his teeth against the pain sparking through his brain. He rarely had headaches, and they were fleeting things, chased away with a quick shift. This writhing beast threatened to split his head apart. How did humans cope?

He tried to raise his vibration, just enough to let his consciousness float above his body without making a full shift, but the effort to concentrate only intensified thrusts from the knives stabbing the back of his eyeballs. And then Adam was beside him again, pressing Marie’s soggy shirt to Ean’s forehead.

“Sorry but this will have to do for now.” Ean could smell river water and the faint scent of the soap Marie used.

“Marie?” He swallowed against another wave of nausea.

“She’s in the truck. Ready to run of course, but doesn’t have her legs under her yet.”

Adam laid a hand over Ean’s stomach, drawing off pain.

“No, Adam,” Ean growled. As the pain diminished, he let his head drop to the straw and stopped fighting.

“It’s fine,” Adam told him. “It doesn’t hit me as hard.” His voice took on a gravelly edge and Ean suspected that was a lie.

“Tell me this. How are we going to live through four days of mating with her?”

Adam sat cross-legged in the straw beside Ean. “It won’t be as hard with two of us to balance the energy. When she learns to stop fighting herself, the pleasure will be more intense than this pain.”

Ean sat up, folded his arms atop his knees, then rested his forehead on them, squeezing his eyes shut. The faint light filtering through cracks in the window frame took on the blaze of neon in his brain. More intense? More intense—even as pleasure—would kill him. “She’s getting stronger. She connected to the doe.” Ean couldn’t do that.

“Females are more perceptive and she was still open emotionally from sex. Don’t worry.”

Ean touched his bruised shoulder. *Right. No worries.*

“If we mix a bit of pain with her pleasure, it helps her stay grounded and channels her energy up toward the next dimension instead of out into everything around her.”

Ean’s left nipple tingled with the memory of her teeth.

“You better go.” He paused, gritting his teeth. His own voice reverberated in his head. “I’m going to shift for awhile and then walk back. Make an excuse for me.”

“She’ll think we’re fighting about her.”

Ean was surprised that they weren’t arguing. “I was stupid, Adam. I shouldn’t have let things go so far.”

Adam stood, dusted the straw from his pants. “I was close by. Just in case. I’ve always got your back, Ean.” He offered Ean a hand up. “You’ll be fine and so will she.”

Ean hated that he needed help up and that he had to lean on Adam for a minute until the world stopped spinning. The magnitude of what they were about to attempt with Marie was sinking in. “Will we be fine? All three of us?”

When Ean could stand without swaying, Adam moved away and started stuffing the remains of lunch into the pack. “You can back out.”

As bad as he felt, this was nothing compared to what Ean would suffer for Marie. In his mind, in his heart, they were already mated. He grabbed the thermos and popped the lid, gulping sweet tea and feeling his energy return.

Unbearable pleasure... She was that and more already. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I’m in for the long haul. Wherever that leads.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Adam never worked outside his lab. He wasn’t really working now. He was guarding the door. He flipped the binder open and picked up a mechanical pencil. Tiny green blocks on white paper, points joined by arching lines, the maps for their futures. He smoothed a wrinkle from the lace tablecloth and cocked his head to catch the soft pad of Marie’s bare feet in the hall upstairs. Hopefully the hot bath and dry clothes would mellow her enough so he could distract her from the idea of leaving. He flipped to a blank page and randomly penciled in points.

He jotted down thoughts in Russian. Friday, he wrote. And that word weighed in his chest, pressing down until his breath was a shallow whisper. Friday night they would take her. They would call up the tigress and step naked into her cage.

He wrote the number 333 and considered. He had spent that many years on this earth, gaining skill, gaining knowledge, stalking wisdom. And yet, in the face of love he felt like a toddler with an indecipherable book in his hands. He wished for the key that would allow him to decipher Marie.

A good place to start looking might be her past. How had she wound up orphaned? It was rare enough to lose two parents, but all three? Not only that, but what of her siblings? Multiple births were the norm, so what had happened to her birth mates? His species was rare and careful records were kept. So most perplexing of all, he hadn’t been able to find the record of three gone missing around the time of Marie’s

birth. Which would mean abandonment. Had a female gone off, delivered on her own and walked away from the babies?

Maybe, he reasoned, she had thought to give them a better life, to allow them to be human and like everyone else. A very young mother might have fallen into the trap of that reasoning. Yet the result was that Marie had instinctively locked so much of herself away—frightened by her own power and drives perhaps—that very little of the real Marie was allowed to leak out. She lived a Spartan life with rigid routines and kept her distance from others, from him, especially from the chaos love threatened to create. That she easily accepted his nonsense explanations for this afternoon's odd manifestations proved her need to cling to a reality much simpler than the one he needed her to live in. So, what would happen to her iron grip on reality when they turned it inside out?

How do you gently say, Oh by the way love, you're a tiger woman and I'm a tiger man? He tossed his pencil down and rubbed his eyes. There had to be an answer here, some way to tell her now, to go forward with everything honest and out in the open. Something more honest than all the smoke and mirrors he'd thrown up during the truck ride home. His stomach grew queasy. How could they set her free with lies?

Her scent came to him and the sound of her bare feet shuffling through the kitchen on her way to the coffee pot. He leaned back in his chair watching her reach into the cabinet for a mug, raising up on her toes, the late afternoon sun coming through the window to illuminate the arch of her back and the thrust of her breasts under one of his white shirts. Copper curls glowed in the warm light.

He watched her pour coffee and pause to inhale the fragrant steam curling above the mug, bringing it close and closing her eyes. Then her eyes popped open, she turned and stared straight into his. A smile lit her face and his heart lifted in response.

He held out an arm and she came to him, settling in his lap and frowning down at his notebook. She looked back to him.

"Something's troubling you." She set down her mug and cupped her hands around his face, her palms still warm from the hot cup. "We don't have to do this, Adam. I made my peace with being childless a long time ago."

But she hadn't, not really, and it tugged at his heart that she would make such a sacrifice for him. He wished he dared to explain that all of this was about so much more than just having a child.

"We will be fine. You and Ean are wonderful together."

She frowned and picked her mug up, taking another sip and swallowing noisily. "I don't understand this. I can't see how you can both be so willing to share a lover."

"It's a matter of expectations. We were raised in an environment where your love wasn't something owned by your partner, where it was okay to love more than one person. Ean and I aren't afraid one of us could steal you away. Why would we want to when it gives double the care and protection to what is most precious to us?"

"I wouldn't feel that way if you two were to start bringing in other women."

Adam laughed. He started to explain and then the humor got the better of him again.

“I don’t see why that’s so funny.”

“It’s just that Ean and I have been worried about surviving you.” A second tigress in their bed, he couldn’t wrap his imagination around it. “Two?”

Marie was not amused and he had to hug her to him to keep her from leaving while he buried his face in her hair and tried to get a grip.

“You talk like I’m some kind of sex fiend,” she grumbled.

“You’re an animal,” he growled into her hair, biting her earlobe.

He felt her soften and her scent carried the promise of moistening to his nose. He was tempted to toss her over his shoulder and carry her to bed now, get an early start, but he held off. He wanted to give her something beautiful. He wanted to give Marie moonlight and two adoring men to worship her.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Don’t believe.*

*Don’t hope.*

*Don’t lose yourself.*

Marie stood rooted at the bottom of the stairs, wondering where she could find the courage to take this first step, a step that could raise her life to a new level, a step that could destroy the best thing life had given her to that point.

Adam found it for her, stepping up first and holding out his hand. She took a deep breath and put her hand in his, watching his fingers close over her own, her hand swallowed in the warmth of his grasp.

She turned back and held a hand to Ean. He took it and lifted her cold fingers to his lips, then turned her hand palm up and gave the inside of her wrist a soft, seductive lick. She shivered and smiled. And they went up. Their footfalls echoing in her mind, like the boom of surf on rocks. She hoped what they had built between them wouldn’t wind up on the rocks because of this night.

At the top of the stairs, Marie stepped ahead, moving down the hall and into the unearthly light of the moonlit bedroom. On the other side of the threshold, she was no longer a creature of time. What she would become instead had yet to be unwrapped.

She wore only Adam’s shirt. Her hands moved to undo the buttons, parting the fabric with stiff epileptic movements. She held it away from her and let it fall with her identity. The Marie she used to be landed in a limp puddle on the floor. She waited for the mystery to unfold, to show her who this night would make her. She had her eyes closed, shades drawn tight against the intellectual Marie, against any hint that this wasn’t the most perfect and beautiful decision she had ever made.

Air stirred in front of her, behind her, Ean and Adam moving, their bodies creating currents, stirring her senses and her mood. They pressed her between them. Hard male bodies flesh-to-flesh with hers, Adam in front and Ean behind. Heat flowed through her, softening tense muscles.

“You need this,” Adam whispered in her right ear.

“You want this,” Ean whispered in the left.

“You are loved,” they promised together.

Oh, she wanted to believe this could be magic. She needed to believe it could be real. Adam’s heart beating under her palms was real. Ean’s hot breath against her neck was real. She had to stay with what was real, move beyond her need for miracles, and make her own future out of something real.

Ean’s fingers spread over her shoulders and her own hands warmed, moving over Adam’s broad chest. Adam’s lips mated to hers, his teeth nipped her bottom lip and gently his tongue slipped in to taste her. She leaned into him. Ean’s hands came around to cup her breasts.

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” she said and rubbed her breasts against Ean’s palms. Nipples tightened, pulled in like they might find a way to hide. Ean pinched them and she moaned.

Adam’s finger slipped between her thighs to stroke her wet slit. That part of her was certain about the rightness of this idea. She felt his lips form a smile against hers. Ean’s teeth scraped her shoulder and pleasure sparked through her. His right hand skimmed down her side and reaching from the back, he joined Adam in testing the waters. The waters were hot, and getting hotter while they took turns dipping their fingers, like wands in a honey pot.

She moaned again and tried to wriggle away but they pressed her tight between them. That melted her. They had her now and she wouldn’t be going anywhere until they had their fill. It came to her as a soft awareness that whispered in the back of her mind. Their attitude was shifting from seductive to something more primitive, primal. Desire buckled her knees.

Ean caught her, lifting her high and swinging toward the bed.

He settled her gently, easing her to the mattress like she was something precious. They stood above her, one on either side of the bed. They looked at each other for a moment, a silent communication and they moved together to take a position on either side of her, them lying on their sides.

When she looked into their eyes, it was like something ancient had taken hold and dictated each step in a choreographed ritual. Adam laid his hand over her heart and Ean placed his over Adam’s hand. They kissed her, first Adam and then Ean. She tasted spiced wine and breathed their scent. She could press her nose to their faces and breathe the maleness of them forever. They nuzzled her when she did and whiskers scraped her. She craved that stubbly feeling, savored it.

They moved their hands to her collarbone, fingers curved claw-like and dragged them slowly down, over her breasts, over her ribs, down to her hip bones. Nails skimmed her skin, the faintest sensation of claws. Not pain. Awakening. Desire uncoiling and opening something inside her.

How was it a barely perceptible scratch could mark her bone deep, unzip her? Two pairs of eyes peered into her secret places. She longed to pull her skin back over her secrets, draw a curtain over her desire, but she looked into the silver depths of Adam’s eyes and laid unresisting, hands at her sides.

They moved like two bodies sharing one mind.

They touched her like they could read hers.



Those fingers parting her sex were too rough, but the touch lightened even as she thought it. Adam. She knew that wicked touch of his, a rapid soft flicking of his finger over her clit, like the quick beat of wings. It made her wriggle and moan. It made her ache to be filled. She wept, right there between her legs, desire's tears, spilling out onto Ean's fingers. And she might have known he couldn't resist dipping his finger in and tasting, like he was sampling something he'd left simmering and wanted to see if it was ready. His eyelids drifted down and a look of pleasure crept over his face. She thought she would never forget how he looked just now with moonlight and shadow painting his face in shades of blue.

He opened his eyes and caught her watching. He gave her his imp's smile, his gaze not leaving hers when he dipped back in a second time and found that spot, that secret high spot inside her, the one only Adam had discovered, that one that made her lose her mind and mew like a hungry kitten.

Adam's mouth moved over hers, his lips sliding, teasing back and forth, a sweet friction, like the one he created in those other lips. His tongue dipped in and she sucked at it, wanting him deeper.

Her control slipped and their wills slipped in to replace it, as stealthily as the rising moon had pushed back shadows and slowly filled the room with pearly blue light. She raised her arms, burying her hands in their hair. She was going down? Or maybe she was rising up? Drowning? Dissolving? Yes dissolving. She tried to hold on.

Moonbeams went to fragments, turning to columns of dancing sparks, flickering like millions of fireflies. Beautiful.

Tears spilled over her lashes and ran down her cheeks. Together, Adam and Ean licked her tears. Too beautiful. It made her cry harder.

Those fingers kept going, driving her forward. The need to come turned into a delicious fever.

"Adam?"

"We've got you, love."

"Let go," Ean coaxed.

Around her the moonbeams reformed, pulsing against the black night and then expanded, bursting apart in a brilliant shower. She wanted to let go like that. She was terrified to let go.

She tried pressing her legs together, shaking her head. Her body vibrated, buzzed as if bees swarmed through her blood. Together they each caught a nipple in their teeth, sucked it gently, tongues flicking the hardening nubs. They bit down. She disintegrated.

One minute she was Marie and the next she was light, the sweetest happiest light she could ever imagine. She was pure bliss, no thoughts, no worries. She could stay just like this forever.

"Come to me, love."

Adam's voice whispered through the light.

"Come to me."

She didn't want to wake up from this dream. If she still had a tongue she would tell him so.

He laughed and it was like bells, little waves of music that set the light dancing.

“You have to breathe,” he said gently.

Marie was inside and outside herself at the same time. Her eyelids weighed a hundred pounds. They fluttered briefly when she tried to lift them and went still. She looked through them instead. From high above she saw their bodies, three shadowy lines, parallel paths, like the dark swipe of a beast’s claw marking the moonlit bed. The sheets were a tangle draped over the foot of the bed, pooling on the floor. We should be tangled, she thought. The lines obeyed.

How was it she could see the backs of their heads and be looking up into their eyes at the same time?

Adam’s eyes went to pure silver in the moonlight. The gold in Ean’s flickered like little yellow stars. She watched worry lines smooth and lips part to pant when her fingers found their cocks. What she did made the muscles of Ean’s stomach clench tight under her forearm. Adam’s breath turned to a hot pant against her cheek.

They were so hot. Hot, rigid, sliding over her palms. A rippling glide of skin and muscle wrapped in her small hands. Ean moaned. Adam sighed. The thick musk of male desire made her mouth water. Her thumbs stroked over the tips of their cocks and found telltale dew. She stirred with the pads of her thumbs. Adam’s face turned into her neck. Ean’s head dropped back on the pillow next to her head. She held the power. These beautiful men were hers to keep. If she wished. If she dared.

She wished.

She dropped her wish into the deep well of Adam’s love.

She pinned that wish to every star in Ean’s eyes.

This was too beautiful. Tears quivered on her lashes. How could anything this beautiful be real?

Adam’s fingers stroked over her wrist, then up and down the length of her arm. He meant to slow her. She must be wrecking their control. Ean gritted his teeth. Sweat glistened on his neck. She licked salty drops and followed it with a sharp nip. His cock jerked.

“Careful,” he growled. The deep tones went right down her spine to pool between her thighs. Adam’s teeth nipped the back of her neck, sending a drugging heat through her that made her want to spread her legs and beg. An ache rippled. Pulsed. Glowed. Surely, they could see it.

They pressed her between them, facing Ean with Adam at her back. The thick tips of their cocks nestled right there where need simmered. She dripped, drizzling them with her honey. She moaned and wriggled, caught between the muscled vise of two hard bodies.

They moved back and forth, a perfectly timed seesawing across her dew-drenched petals. Synchronized. How? How could they even think?

She would lose her mind!

It was so incredibly hot in here.

Down there.

“Careful,” she panted. “You’ll get scalded.”

A chuckle rumbled in Ean’s chest, a delicious vibration against her breasts.

Adam rubbed his wet cock against her hot ass and teased, “I bet my poker is hotter than your fire pit.”

“Prove it.” She paused, wondering if she could possibly say what she was thinking. Ean’s cock bumped her clit and she forgot modesty, the words wrenched out of her. It sounded like begging. “Stir my coals.”

“Soon.” He moved back against her pussy, the friction sending a fresh drizzle over his cock. “Mmm. Very soon. We’re going on a journey first.”

Ean pressed his lips to the center of her forehead. Damp heat with a stirring breath. A faint vibration hummed under them.

She squirmed. “Couldn’t we make love first?”

She could feel a smile shape Ean’s lips, a warm line drawn across her forehead then returning to a pucker. Their cocks moved against the fire in her clit. She wanted to drag back and forth over the length of both until she boiled over. Then she wanted to fuck them. She smiled, wishing she should take their cocks together and push them deep inside against that agonizing ache.

“We’ll get to that too,” Adam said.

“Hmmm?” She must have missed something.

“Listen now,” Adam said. “No thoughts.”

She thought of a question but it scattered under Ean’s tongue. That spot on her forehead was starting to buzz like a mad bee. She squirmed but it only rubbed her throbbing body parts against their throbbing body parts.

Throbbing. When she noticed it, she realized it had been there awhile, faint and growing stronger. They throbbed in time together, like cats purring. She shivered, taking it in.

“Let go,” Ean murmured. “No thoughts.”

Their hands were running up and down her body, over her skin. Hot, throbbing hands. They smoothed, soothed, stretched and unleashed more heat where she already burned. Under their touch her skin seemed to tighten and thin. Then they started licking, licking her ears, her neck, her shoulders, her face, her nipples. Teeth scraped and nipped. Hot breath whispered over her, ran through her. She was going transparent, her skin turning to gauze.

She would lose her mind.

A hard hot cock slid inside her.

*At last!*

It felt like sparks, sharp stinging pleasure where it scraped the sensitive walls. She was shivering hard now, her teeth chattering. How could she shiver when her blood had turned to liquid fire?

Adam withdrew and Ean slid in.

*Yes!*

A slow, deep drive.

*Oh, please...*

Adam took his place. They had her between them, clamped between two furnaces, taking turns dipping in. At this rate they could last an hour. But she wouldn't. She wouldn't last another minute. She was already lit up like a Fourth of July sparkler.

She would come apart, scatter in a thousand brilliant sparks.

They pushed into her over and over, unraveling her with a precise, measured pattern. Dig deep. Caress every quivering nerve ending. Pause. Feel her quiver and squeeze. Whip out. Pause. Let her crave. Repeat.

Her brain was going to mush. Soon it would leak out of her ears.

"Be here," Adam said. "Be who you are."

And she was there, in the empty spaces between thrusts, trying not to drown in pleasure, catching her breath before the next wave rolled in to fill her. But she learned in the endless year that passed between one breath and the next. She discovered emptiness filled her too, set something blossoming high in her chest. Something she could keep.

God, she needed. Them. This.

Don't take it, she thought.

Ean slid out. Pause. Adam slid in.

Don't take it away.

"Don't take which?" Adam asked.

"Both. I need both."

Ean drove in harder. And then Adam. The pace quickened.

She really was losing her mind. She couldn't tell the difference between what she thought and what she said.

They stopped. She was shivering hard enough to rattle her teeth loose. Why did they stop? Her bones buzzed. The room swayed like they were out at sea.

She could see what she couldn't see, like her skin had eyes. Fat cocks glistening with fluids, poised,

ready to arrow into her. Ean and Adam looking at each other like they had a plan...

*They wouldn't! Couldn't! It wasn't possible.*

But they did.

They thrust up together while their hands dragged her down and she was impaled on both together. Powerful thrusts rocked her. One stroke. Two.

“No, no, no...”

A cry peeled out of her throat, deepened to a scream and then to a roar.

Teeth sank into her shoulders.

Two cocks exploded inside her.

She lost her mind.

## Chapter Five

The morning blazed bright on the other side of her eyelids. Male bodies pressed against hers on both sides, their limbs a heavy tangle around her. Marie's mind scanned through the various complaints her body registered—achy back, achy muscles, assorted bruises. A headache nagged, a low-level throb that came from hunger ignored too long. Under it all was a deep, satisfied feeling, a joy that filled her up and spilled over into a smile she was sure looked lopsided and silly. How was it that a few hours of sex could wind up feeling like a week of sex?

Coffee, food, a hot shower and she'd be a new woman. She opened her eyes, blinked, then squinted against the sun. Her nose felt like an ice cube. The curtains fluttered in the breeze. One end of the rod had come loose and they drooped over the doorway, swirling like a drunken scarf dancer. Who left the balcony doors open?

Adam and Ean were snoring their way through a version of dueling chainsaws. She scooted from under Adam's arm and Ean's leg. She didn't want to wake them so she inched away and crawled to the bottom of the bed.

Marie realized two things as she stood up. She'd been pummeled with a wrecking ball during the night and hunger had gnawed a hole clear through her belly to her spine. This hunger wasn't just an irritable feed-me emptiness, it was a great, yawning cavern that screamed to be filled with anything and everything at hand.

She headed for the kitchen, or more accurately, coffee. A sheet hooked around her ankle, hampering progress. Marie bent to untangle herself and straightened, holding the sheet, trying to make sense of what she saw. Shredded? She couldn't pull a memory from her foggy mind to explain it. How did they manage to shred the sheet? Her stomach growled. A headache nagged. She couldn't decipher that puzzle without coffee. Her stomach growled loud enough to compete with the snoring contest going on behind her. Food first. Answers later.

She made a pit stop at the bathroom. What on earth? A mountain of towels, what had to be every towel in the house, oozed gray water in the tub. The room had a wet-dog smell. While she was focused on the towels, her foot sank into cold mush with a squish. The floor mats were soaked. She shuddered and shook her foot. What had they tried to dry off?

Swimming. Something about swimming lurked in her foggy brain. In November? Her screaming bladder and growling stomach insisted she take care of business and save that puzzle for later as well.

The crisp air in the hallway made her shiver. Obviously the heat was off. She didn't know what had happened to her clothes. Ean and Adam were always tucking things away, hiding them from her to keep her naked, most likely. She swiped a pair of Adam's sweatpants and Ean's shirt from the dryer before heading downstairs. The clothes hung like rags on a scarecrow. She probably looked gruesome enough this morning to cause crows to fall dead mid-flight. The way Ean had been stuffing her with food the past week, she'd fit into his clothes before long. Her raging hunger suggested that her body was getting attached to the truckloads of food he served up at every meal.

She could worry about beauty when she had some carbs and coffee to knock the cobwebs out of her brain. She snagged her purse from the hall closet on the way to the kitchen.

One stale bagel lurked in the breadbox. It was hard enough to crack teeth but she didn't care. Hadn't Adam just bought them yesterday morning? It must be one of those all-natural, preservative-free brands. She softened it with a quick nuke in the microwave and then plunked in a mug of water. While the water heated for instant coffee, she dug out her cell phone. The screen was black. She frowned. She'd charged it yesterday and hadn't used it. She held down the power button and it lit up. Why would her cell be off? She never turned it off.

The startup song chimed at the same time as the microwave. She chiseled instant coffee from an out-of-date jar and lightened it with several spoons of powdered creamer. In the back of her mind she could see Ean rolling his eyes and gnashing his teeth. Nothing less than freshly ground designer beans, French-pressed, and cream straight from the cow would meet his standard for what should cross her lips. She inhaled and took a sip. She should be glad he didn't insist on kettling his own bagels and baking them fresh. She gnawed at the stale bread, washed a bite down with coffee and scrounged in the cabinet. She found a box of Oaty Rings, a bowl's worth left in the bottom.

With the cereal tucked under one arm, purse over her other shoulder, bagel balanced on top the coffee cup and the cell in her free hand she headed for the kitchen table to enjoy a little solitude before the men got up. It had barely been a week and the two of them were consuming every waking second of her life. She sat, wincing at the tenderness. Not all of that consumption was bad but she needed a little alone time to recharge and catch up with herself.

She flipped open the cell phone to check the message queue. They had a programming release coming up on a project she'd done a few modules for, and while no one had resisted the idea of her taking a few days off, she'd promised to be available if the testing hit a snag and they needed her.

No messages. Great. Then she noticed the date.

She nearly inhaled the bite of bagel she been chewing.

Four days?

It wasn't Saturday morning—it was Wednesday morning!

She had lost four days?

Her voice mail was empty. Wouldn't they have called from the office to see where she was?

Think. She tried to think. She couldn't. How do you lose four days?

\* \* \* \* \*

Adam swatted at the goose honking in his...ear?

The honking stopped. "Ow. What?" His hand had connected with Ean's nose.

Adam opened his eyes, pushed Ean away and rolled from the bed. He stood up too fast and the world abruptly turned black. He steadied himself against the wall. Low blood sugar, he thought automatically. When his head cleared he glanced about for Marie and knew she'd probably headed for food.

Ean sat up, scratching his chest, squinting in the bright light. He glanced around the room. "We got a little wild."

Adam bent, picked up a lampshade, decided it was beyond repair and set it beside the lamp. "A little."

He couldn't help the grin that came with the memory of the three of them in the river, fully shifted. They'd mounted Marie with the moon overhead, the trees like a fortress holding off the world, the river surging around and over their bodies. Then the grin disappeared. He couldn't feel her presence.

"She's not here, Ean."

Adam grabbed some sweatpants from the dryer on the way down the hall. He stopped at the top of the stairs, hopping on one foot and then the other. He had to hold onto them to keep them from falling down when he raced down the stairs.

"Her breakfast is here on the table, barely eaten," he shouted and went back to the front door.

Ean met him at the bottom of the stairs wearing sweats that showed his ankles and barely reached his hips. "Maybe she got a call from work."

"I turned off her phone and hid her keys. Her purse and jacket are gone."

Ean opened the front door. "So is your car."

Adam sat on the bottom stair and stared out the door at the empty space where his red Mustang should be.

"So we can assume she was in a hurry. Either she didn't want to wake us or she was too furious to speak to us." He'd be stuck driving Marie's spicy orange Aveo if he went to look for her. Great.

"Do you think she remembers shifting?"

"She can't carry the memories from that reality back to this one yet. She's not accustomed to processing information like a tiger. It slips away like a dream when she shifts back." She had always joked after an

intense night of loving that Adam was so hot he melted her synapses. Sex took her closest to her true nature, pushed her to the edge. It had taken only the completion of the triad to make her whole and carry her over.

“Then what do you think she’s angry about?” Ean closed the door, scratched at a four-day growth of beard and shuffled down the hall toward the kitchen. His hair stuck out in weird clumps that made Adam run hands over his own to smooth it. A good look at them in the morning light had probably sent her running. He followed Ean into the kitchen.

“She’s probably got about a hundred good reasons to be mad. I called her job and said she was out of town dealing with a family emergency. I turned off her phone. I hid her keys. Those are just the things she knows about.”

Ean was spooning coffee into the machine. He frowned, dumped the grounds back into the canister and started counting again. “She needs the time off. This pregnancy is going to knock her flat.”

“She managed to slip away before I could break that to her.” Not that he was looking forward to *The Talk*. He was hoping she’d be so sex-sated, so head over heels in love that being a tiger wouldn’t seem like such a big deal. Ridiculous in hindsight. But certainly four days of nonstop sex should have mellowed her, cushioned the blow.

“Well, if she took your car and left hers it means she’s coming back.”

“Let’s hope.” And, he thought, *let’s hope she doesn’t discover anything else I haven’t gotten around to telling her about.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Marie contacted the office on the drive to her apartment.

Irene answered the phone. “Marie, sweetie, I hope things are better with your sister.”

Sister? She was nearly into the intersection before she realized the light was red and had to slam on the brakes. She didn’t have a sister.

“About the same,” she said, hoping the ever-expansive Irene would expand. She did.

“Well that’s a shame. Adam mentioned she’s expecting. I’ll just keep her on my prayer list. Don’t you worry, it’ll all be fine as soon as those babies come. High blood pressure is a normal thing with multiples.”

What on earth? What had Adam been saying?

The driver behind her laid into the horn. Marie hadn’t noticed the green light. She waved an apology and drove on.

“Well... Yes. Thank you, Irene. I just wanted to check in on the project.”

Marie could hear the soft whimper of an infant. Irene’s new baby she thought. She should ask how the baby was. She couldn’t. The new policy allowing infants to come to work had been implemented last week. She hadn’t mentioned it to Adam but the reason she’d agreed to taking a few days off was to



avoid the agony of days spent with the smell of babies, the sound of babies, and the sight of other women with babies in their arms while Marie's arms remained empty.

Marie decided to take advantage of the opening Adam had given her. "Listen Irene, things here are a lot of hurry up and wait." Marie did the best she could with the vague details she'd gleaned. "You know how it is with doctors. So I'll just do a bit of telecommuting while I'm waiting."

"Sure sweetie. I'll pass word along. Al mentioned he'd put some things in your web workspace, but that none of it was urgent."

"Okay, you can get me on my cell or by email until I get back."

"You just take your time."

"I'll check back as soon as I can." Marie hung up. What had gotten into Adam? Had it occurred to him that people would want progress reports on the babies? Multiples? She was going to have to carry pictures of fictional triplets in her wallet.

She pulled into her parking space, slammed the car door and stomped up two flights of stairs. Adam was way over the line. Okay, she was given to working fourteen-hour days and vacations held no appeal but that didn't give him the right.

She didn't slow down to shower or change. She wanted to be away before he figured out she was gone and came after her. He'd be annoyed about his car but her keys hadn't jumped out of her purse by themselves. He'd just have to cope.

She pulled out her travel bag, dumped in enough clothes to last her a week and left. Later, when she cooled off, she might text him. Might.

\* \* \* \* \*

The old house leaned toward the eastern hollow and the porch sloped sharply toward the southern dip of the front yard. A big white elephant her father had called it. A big drunk elephant her mother said. A lumpy wart growing off the mountain's shoulder, Marie thought. When Marie stood in the front yard she could still hear their voices—her mother singing and up to her elbows in sudsy dishwater, her father charming the cats with interesting bits from the classifieds. She could smell the bread set to rise in the kitchen, hear the creak of dad's rocker where he read the paper by the front room window.

They had died while she was in college. Marie was the last of a long procession of foster children they'd taken in over the years. They'd been too old to take on a special needs baby. "Failure to thrive," her father had scoffed when he told the story. "Morris don't fail." They adopted her and she had thrived in their skillful care. This was still the place she came to when she needed to sort herself out. This is what she needed.

Marie had parked in grass-choked gravel that marked the end of the drive, slipped off her shoes and waded across the creek with her one small bag, while cold water swirled just below her knees. She'd forgotten boots.

With a pang she thought of Adam, always ready with her sweater or umbrella before she knew she needed them. Or to call her office with fantastical stories to get her out of work, she thought grimly. She was going to have a serious chat with both men when she got back. Set some boundaries. First, she

needed perspective and a chance to catch up with herself.

She slipped socks back over wet feet and stuffed her feet back into her shoes. The yard was knee-deep in leaves, the scent of sun-warmed oak leaves bringing back memories of romping in them as a child. Her father would rake them into huge piles that she demolished. She decided to make them her project. A few days worth of raking in the autumn sun. Just her, the leaves, and the few birds that remained. She glanced uneasily around at the quiet forest. Hopefully that was all the company she would have. Bears ought to be hibernating by now.

The house was sparsely furnished to leave running room for stray children plus an assortment of one-eyed cats and three-legged dogs. It seemed a huge cavern now, hungry for the sound of small feet. She dropped her bag on the couch and a dust mote swirled upward to catch sunlight spilling through the window. There was no dust in Adam's house. She flopped down beside her bag and propped her feet, still shod, on the scarred coffee table. This would be a nice change.

She would not be lonely.

A sudden hollow feeling had her pressing her hand to her stomach. She had grabbed groceries on her way through town and had knocked the edge off her hunger on the way up the mountain. She just needed real food. A sensible meal, tomato soup and grilled cheese would fix her up.

She made a mental list. Unpack car, eat, shower. She stifled a yawn. Nap. She never needed naps. She yawned again.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I am okay."

"Will be away a few days."

"Do not call office."

Adam snapped the phone shut. What use were voice messages like that? They didn't tell him anything.

He cursed technology at the same time he blessed it. She was all right. She was still speaking to him—kind of. She wouldn't respond to his calls. He couldn't ask anything. He couldn't explain anything. But worst of all, he couldn't warn her.

The door slammed and Ean jogged down the stairs to Adam's lab. "She wasn't at the apartment. I drove by her work and your car wasn't in the lot." He tossed Marie's keys on Adam's desk.

Adam relayed Marie's messages.

"Away a few days...how many days?"

"I don't know. How many do we have before things get critical?"

"Gestation is about three months and the sooner we get her shifted the better off she'll be. So many factors go into determining her shift date and we have no way to monitor them."

"Okay, let's assume worst case. How long before she gets into trouble?"

“It could be as little as a week or as long as three weeks. After three weeks it could get serious.”

“She will come back before then.” Adam hoped he sounded more certain than he felt. Her human form could not handle the rapid growth of so many babies. She had to be back by then.

## Chapter Six

A brisk autumn morning was already mellowing toward noon when Marie woke the next day. Even after she splashed cold water on her face and drank two cups of coffee, she could have gone back to bed. The men had worried about surviving her? She took a third cup of coffee to the porch and surveyed the yard. She’d been up here to mow at the end of September when Adam was away on business.

Just looking at the sea of leaves that needed tackling made her tired. She sat down on the top step. If Adam knew about this place, he’d have sent an army of gutter cleaners, leaf rakers, plumbers, and painters to set it all right for her. He loved solving her problems. But this wasn’t a problem. This house was family, like an aging aunt that had grown crooked and wrinkly and rooted in your heart. It was the last surviving member of the only family that wanted her. She had to care for the house herself.

An hour after she’d started raking, vertigo forced her to stop. Every time she turned her head the world went into a spin.

She decided it must be hunger and ate a lunch that would have impressed Ean. Now she was dizzy and drowsy. The couch called to her. Just for a minute she thought, lying on her side, tucking her palms under her cheek. The room was black and cold when she woke. She blinked at the darkness, only half awake and the image of tigers floated before her eyes. Three tigers racing between trees, leaping into a river. The image faded and her stomach growled.

She pushed up on her elbows. The dizziness remained. Maybe a touch of flu. She squashed the little voice of hope in the back of her mind. There would be no symptoms of pregnancy less than a week out from conception. Her stomach sounded another gurgling complaint. Flu didn’t normally leave you ravenous.

She fixed a large bowl of cold cereal. She stirred her cornflakes, pale orange islands in creamy milk. She liked the cereal when it just started to get soggy. An image came to her, the way a snatch of a dream sometimes did, orange on white, soft creamy fur, her hand stroking under a tiger’s chin. A purr rumbled loud as thunder. Glowing yellow eyes. A long pink tongue slid out over gleaming teeth—

She dropped her spoon. The image vanished like a switch tripping and she shivered. It was only a dream. She knew that. She knew she could pick up that thread and follow it back into her mind, recall more. She didn’t want to. Her stomach churned like a lake in a storm. She pushed the bowl away.

She laid a fire in the living room hearth and curled up on the couch with her mini laptop while the fire crackled and a cup of herbal tea soothed her. She logged into unforum.

When you need to escape your problems, there’s nothing like solving someone else’s. Some people smoked dope when they wanted to stop thinking, some drank whiskey. Marie’s drug of choice was immersive fiction. Marie followed a breadcrumb trail to a story cleverly scattered across cyberspace. She couldn’t decide what was more addictive, the story, or the hunt for each new scene. She’d recently

found one story character's blog and was reading through the archives. The woman was moving too fast with guys she didn't know anything about.

"Careful LadyBlue," she murmured, "there's more to these guys than meets the eye." She spotted the email link and smiled. "I've always wanted the chance to talk some sense into a character." She clicked the link and started typing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ean leaned in the doorway and looked across the great plain of the empty bed, through the balcony doors. Adam hadn't moved in ten minutes. A breeze tugged his shirtsleeves. He just stood there looking, as if the stars might rearrange themselves into a map, or type out a hint as to where he and Ean should look next if he stared long enough.

Ean went out to stand beside him. "She must have a friend, Adam. There has to be someone who knows where she would go."

"I was her friend, Ean." Only his lips moved, his Adam's apple rising and falling sharply with the words. In the faint light, Ean could see a glittery sheen to Adam's eyes.

"This is what she wanted, Adam. It's not betrayal to give her motherhood."

Ean watched Adam's throat work again, his eyes closed tight as if the starlight were too bright for them.

"It is, the way I did it," he whispered.

\* \* \* \* \*

She needed a doctor. Marie faced that fact. Time to pull herself together and drive back into town.

She'd thought a gentle walk in cool morning air might clear her head, push off the remains of whatever bug had hold of her. It left her too weak to think. Even now, on her hands and knees after losing her breakfast and washing her face in the cool stream, she could have stayed just so, watching the water swirl past for another hour or two as long as she didn't have to move.

She dug out her cell and punched a button, then cursed the cloud-carpeted sky. Still no signal. She snapped it shut and tucked it into her back pocket. Heavy clouds and intermittent rain had been stalled over the mountains for days. How many days now? She'd lost track. She didn't have the energy to drag the phone back out.

She'd stayed away too long, dreading the return to work at the office and lured by the rain that rolled in at the weekend. Nothing greased her mind's wheels like misty light and rain thrumming on a tin roof. It turned her code to poetry in execution. The logic fell from her fingers to the keyboard in tight, clean lines. The programs didn't just perform, they executed like an elegant ballet. She'd finished all the work she downloaded and the satellite link wouldn't connect through the clogged sky any better than the phone.

Now that she accepted what couldn't be put off, she couldn't get back. She sat back on her heels. Water seeped into the imprints her hands left in the mud. She reached to touch the brown puddle where her right palm had been. The print changed, grew as big as her head, dome-shaped with four toes. She blinked and her own small print was there again, filled with muddy water. The dream flashbacks had grown more frequent and more disturbing.

She pushed to her feet, feeling the waistband of her jeans dig. She couldn't snap them. The zipper had worked its way down. She sucked in her stomach and tugged it back in place. She must be retaining water like crazy. She blamed that on a diet of canned soup and crackers that was just about all she'd managed to keep down over the weekend. She leaned against a tree and gathered her energy. Ean's pampering and Adam's overprotectiveness would be welcome now.

Up the hill, into the house for her keys, back down the hill, it seemed a journey of ten million steps. She stopped twice and sat on the damp ground, a chill working up through her bones. Weariness ran marrow-deep, forcing her to allow her craving for Adam out of storage, using that to keep her going.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Okay, Ean, Let's try it again." Adam turned off the lamp.

Night had descended and he hoped they would have more success now than they had earlier in the afternoon. Darkness opened the side of the mind that spoke in images. There was just a faint glow now and Ean could no longer see his own reflection in the black mirror. A candle placed across the room scattered a faint sheen of light over the surface, giving a sense of depth.

Adam pushed the remote button and the music flowed in the background, a stream gurgled, birds sang to the accompaniment of a pan flute.

"Just breathe," Adam said gently. "You aren't trying to see something in the mirror. You are giving your mind a canvas where it can paint what it knows." Adam put his hand on Ean's shoulder. "Just breathe."

"She's afraid," Ean said. "How do I relax?"

Adam could feel the tension in the muscles, knotted cords under his palm. "You do it by choosing to, because it's the only way to help her."

He felt the surrender then, that giving up. The tension knotting his own shoulders eased. This time they might make some progress.

The mirror was old, older than Adam, perhaps older than the magus himself. You could feel the pull of power, a wave washing through the room.

Ean's breath rose and fell like the sound of distant surf and with each release Adam felt the tension recede. Connected to Ean, he watched the mirror for some hint, a clue. Soft blue fog filled the surface.

"I feel her. It's faint."

"Good. Stay detached. Let her come to you. Think of her eyes, the windows to her soul, see them shining out of the darkness and into you."

"I see white, white everywhere. Bright light. She's afraid."

"What else is there? Peel back the fear. What lies on the other side?"

"Weariness. She's tired. Something... Confused."

An image took shape in the mirror. Did Ean see? Ean was better with aural telepathy and empathy. Visions made him nervous.

“Horrible. Something she sees is horrible and evil.” Ean was saying. “She’s sick, scared.”

Fog reshaped itself into the image of a man, his arm slung over the shoulders of a zebra, a rifle in his other hand. The zebra stared, dead-eyed, its head draped like a trophy over the man’s lap. The mirror went black.

Adam stared openmouthed. Where the fuck was she?

Ean leaned forward, hands over his face. “I can’t get it, Adam. I can’t see anything but I feel her fear like cold hands around my throat, choking fear.”

Adam squeezed Ean’s shoulder. “It’s okay.”

Ean looked up at Adam, his voice tight. “You try.”

“It’s no good, Ean. There’s a wedge, like a wall between us. I can’t get to her.” He switched the lamp on.

“That’s not her wall. It’s yours.”

Tightness spread across his chest, like the chest cavity shrinking, growing too small for heart and lungs. Adam rubbed at the breastbone with the heel of his hand. “You’re wrong.”

Ean opened his mouth to argue, then cocked his head sideways. “Do you hear that?”

Adam turned his head, tilted it. Then he heard.

Ean shot from his chair. “Where’s your cell?”

Adam flew for the stairs with Ean close enough behind to be a second skin.

It was upstairs on the bedroom dresser and it had quit by the time he held it in shaking hands. The screen displayed one missed call. He punched the button and held his breath. Marie’s name came up. He redialed.

“Pick up,” he muttered. “Please, pick up.”

“Adam?”

He dropped to his knees. His eyes burned and the room took on a watery blur.

“Where, love? Where are you?”

“I need you.” He could hear a tearful wobble behind her words.

“Just tell me where you are.”

“They said I’m pregnant, Adam.”

He swiped at his eyes. “You’re at a hospital then?” he said, his voice weak, tinny.

“Six babies<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>Six. How?”

“Marie, please—”

“They said second trimester. That’s not possible.”

“Who said, honey?”

Ean dropped to his knees and leaned in. Adam angled the phone and turned up the volume so they could both listen.

“Don’t listen to them,” Adam said. “Obviously, they don’t know much.” More lies but she sounded so frightened. He couldn’t think of a way to calm her.

“I saw the ultrasound. Little circles scattered like air pockets in bread dough.”

“It takes skill to read those things right. Tell me where you are, love.”

“One of those quickie care places. The one between the carwash and the pet groomer, Poodle Doos. Can’t think of the name of the clinic.” The sound crackled, her voice fading. “I’m not feeling well. I need to hang up.”

The connection dropped.

Ean was already heading for the door.

“Shirt and shoes,” Adam snapped.

Ean detoured for the closet. Adam raced back down the stairs for his keys.

## Chapter Seven

Ean hadn’t questioned why Adam felt a need to rent a box van two days ago. He didn’t question why Adam insisted on taking that instead of the car. He didn’t ask Adam about a plan for getting Marie out of the clinic because he had assumed Adam would have one. Adam always had everything figured out and under control. Everything but this.

The receptionist had her arms folded over her chest. She leaned back in her chair. “If she’s your wife, why aren’t you listed as the person to call?”

“Maybe she didn’t feel like filling in every blank on the ten-page admittance form,” Adam said in a tone that could freeze hell over.

At this rate they’d be tossed out by their whiskers as quick as she could call security. Ean stepped up to the counter, squared his shoulders and placed his hands palms down on either side of the little wooden sign-in clipboard. “I’m Ms. Morris’ doctor.”

The corner of her lip curled as her gaze traveled from his hands, to where his t-shirt didn't quite cover his bellybutton, to his face. Okay, he probably needed a shave. He resisted the sudden urge to smooth his hair. He probably needed a bath too. The t-shirt he wore was too tight and too short. Adam looked only slightly better.

"Are you?" Her tone sneered. "Her family doctor isn't listed either."

"Just ask her," Adam snapped.

Adam's hands curled to fists on the counter. His lips pressed tight, the frustrated roar they suppressed vibrated in the air around Ean.

Fortunately, the receptionist shoved her chair back and stalked off. Her heels rapped on the tile floor. The sound paused just on the other side of the waiting room door and Ean's keen hearing picked up women's voices conversing. "They'll have to wait. She just collapsed—"

They weren't waiting to hear more. Ean slammed through the waiting room door and Adam was right behind him. The ladies whirled round and flapped their hands as if they could herd the men back to their proper place. Adam headed for the first exam room in the row. The nurse made the mistake of inserting herself between him and his goal.

"You can't do this." She jabbed her file folder in the direction of the waiting room. "Go sit. We'll call you." She inched forward a step, trying to crowd Adam toward the door.

Ean could feel tension build, see in his mind's eye the warning, whip-like snap of a tiger's tail. Adam's voice menaced, snapped. "Tell me where Marie Morris is or I will rip the door from each room until I find her."

The nurse took a step back, hugging a folder she carried. Adam turned back to the first exam room. Ean didn't know what the nurse thought, but he didn't doubt Adam would rip the door from its hinges.

"She's in number five," the nurse squeaked.

That's where they found her, curled on her side under a paper sheet, looking pale, an IV attached. Ean grabbed her chart and joined Adam, closing the door in the nurse's face. They might have three minutes before reinforcements showed up. He scanned the chart.

Marie struggled to sit. Adam touched her face, kissed her lightly on the lips. She grabbed his wrist with both hands, clinging.

"How're we doing?" he asked Ean.

Ean tossed the chart on the table, one hand reached for her wrist and the other grabbed a stethoscope from a counter. It took thirty seconds to assess and give Adam an answer.

"She has to be shifted."

"Can it wait 'til we get home?"

"No."



Marie was looking from one to the other. “What’s wrong? My babies?” Her hand went to her stomach.

Ean put his hand over her lower abdomen, next to hers, the swell of her uterus palpable. “Our babies are just fine sweetheart. It’s you we’re worried about.”

“Relax,” Adam said, stroking hair back from her face. His voice took on a gentle hypnotic tone. “Put your head back, think calm happy thoughts.”

“Tell me the truth, Adam.”

He smiled, a smile so bright it made Ean squint. Calm oozed from Adam’s pores. How did he go from ready to rip the nurse’s heart out—and eat it while she watched—to making Marie sigh and flutter her lashes in just minutes? Marie’s pulse slowed, her breath deepened and she laid back.

Adam kept stroking her hair. “Everything will be fine. We’ll get you out of here and find some proper care.”

Ean disconnected the IV and pulled the needle from her arm. The exam room door banged open without the customary knock preceding it. The nurse led the charge with a doctor in tow and a security guard behind him. Ean ignored them. He pressed a cotton ball to Marie’s arm and told her to keep pressure there.

Adam tucked the paper sheet around her and lifted her.

“She’s decided to leave,” Ean told the gang at the door.

The doctor stepped around the nurse. “She needs a hospital.” He waved an iPhone. “I arranged a specialist and an ambulance.”

“Cancel them,” Ean said.

“Why a specialist? What’s wrong?” Marie’s state bordered on hysteria, her blood pressure was through the roof and this idiot had to make things worse.

“Clear the way, Ean,” Adam growled. His glare shot flames.

All three took a step back when Ean turned and faced them but he was sure it was Adam that scared them. Adam was scaring him.

They huddled against the door when Adam shoved past. Ean maneuvered to keep himself between his family and the medical team, uncertain who needed the protecting.

Ean tried to put his hand on the nurse’s shoulder. She flinched away. He tugged at the bottom of his t-shirt instead and hoped to appear more professional than he felt. He met the doctor’s eyes when he spoke, keeping his voice low and calm.

“I’m her doctor and she will get the care she needs. Her mental state is fragile, Dissociative Identity Disorder. We’d made such progress with her. The pregnancy will bring on a regression. We have to get her back to the facility where we can monitor her and adjust her medications.”

It was like watching a cold front come in. Their expressions went from indignant to frosty. The doctor mentioned waiting patients and exited. The security guard followed the doctor's example and remembered something he had to do. The nurse, to her credit, didn't look ready to concede but knew she'd be fighting a losing battle. Mental patients weren't easy patients or easy money. She pointed to Marie's purse and a plastic sack of clothes on a chair near the bed. "She'll want her things."

She left then, and he took the opportunity to grab Marie's chart, snatching all the papers and stuffing them in the sack. That's when he noticed, when he looked up, the picture on the wall. A man, the doctor he realized, hugging a lion, holding its sagging head so lifeless eyes could stare into the camera lens, a rifle leaning on a rock beside him. Ean's jaw dropped. There were other pictures, lined up on the walls like a museum exhibition, only the victims changed. A big horn sheep, a moose, a zebra. Ean's stomach went queasy.

It was like looking at a serial killer's gallery. And while this sort of display might be accepted among humans, in no society Ean could imagine was it the proper thing to grace the walls of a medical facility.

*Ean!* Adam's urgent mental nudge broke the spell.

Ean grabbed Marie's things and raced down the hall. He put himself between the receptionist and the phone when he leaned over the counter to grab the stack of folders on her desk.

"How much does she owe?" he demanded, plucking the one with Marie's name from the pile. There wasn't a terminal by this desk so he was fairly certain nothing had been entered in a database.

"Those are the clinic's property," she said, making a grab for Marie's folder. Ean held it out of reach. He didn't have time for this. They'd have to deposit funds to the clinic later when they hacked in to check the database.

"I'll bring them back," he lied. "We need this info for a hospital admission. I'll pay up her bill then."

He ran for the parking lot. They needed to get on the road and keep their fingers crossed that the police wouldn't be called.

Adam had the van at the front door.

Marie huddled pale and frightened in the passenger seat.

Ean hopped in the back of the van. Adam had it moving before the door was shut.

"Let's pull around back out of the way," he said. "We'll make Marie more comfortable."

Ean snatched a blanket from the heap he'd thrown in the van before they left the house. With a snap he shook out wrinkles and spread it on the floor.

The van stopped. Adam set the parking brake and helped Marie into the back. Ean settled her on the blanket. He glanced nervously around the tight space.

"Are you sure there's enough room?"

"Enough room?" Marie looked between them. "Room for what? You could hold a square dance in here."

Adam took a deep breath, squared his shoulders and exhaled.

“Maybe you should sit up front,” he told Ean. *Things might get a little...exciting*. He was shrugging out of his clothes and pitching them into the front seat.

Ean kissed Marie’s cheek. Her pupils narrowed. She put her hand in his, pleading for truth. “What’s going on?”

Ean squeezed her hand and moved to the passenger seat.

“Listen, love, there isn’t a lot of time for explanations.” Adam unfastened the tie on her hospital gown and slid it down her arms. “As things stand, they might only make matters worse, so I’m just going to do this.” He kissed her other cheek. “Remember I love you,” he whispered.

Marie opened her mouth, her eyes flashed wide. She put a hand up, palm out as if that could stop him. Adam pressed his own palm to hers. They vanished.

The air rippled and glowed. They reappeared a few seconds later. Adam still human. Marie not. The size shift slammed Adam against the side of the van hard enough to knock the wind out of him, trapping him between steel wall and tiger.

When Adam got his breath, he was the first to speak.

“Isn’t she stunning?”

White fur, black stripes, blue eyes. She would be unique among the Pantherian tigers.

Her tail twitched a warning.

“Stunning and really pissed off,” Ean said.

Adam scrambled for the front when she rose to all fours with an ear-popping snarl.

Ean put his finger to his lips. “Shh, someone might hear.”

Her response was more a roar than a growl. Adam dove into the driver’s seat. He managed to yank on his sweatpants and then struggled into his shirt while he released the brake and dropped the truck in gear.

“I think we better discuss this on the way home. Ean, you go back and look after her.”

Ean looked from him to her and back again. “Are you out of your mind?”

“She loves you. She won’t hurt you.”

Marie thrust her head between the seats and snarled, all her gleaming teeth bared.

“I think she disagrees.”

Adam was checking mirrors, the van rolling backward.

“Think soothing thoughts, Ean. Pet her.”

Ean eyed her teeth. He was not petting her.

He did try to find a soothing thought. It was hard to do while looking at teeth and jaws that could crack his head like a walnut, especially when he deserved to have his head cracked.

He started to hum a lullaby, well sort of a lullaby, *Sweet Baby James* . It occurred to him that he'd better learn some real lullabies for their babies.

Her ears twitched. He hoped the song would make her think of the babies and calm her. Her new nose captured her attention and she turned toward the back to sniff the sack with her things, the abandoned paper sheet, the blankets. One ear stayed cocked toward Ean. The van turned a corner and bounced through a pothole. The movements threw her off balance and into the wall. She snarled. Her tail slapped Ean's face. When she stood, another turn toppled her. She stayed down.

Ean kept humming. Her aggression seeped away but her breathing didn't slow. It came in short shallow hitches. He didn't like that woozy sway to her head. Very carefully he inched from his seat toward her, continuing to hum.

They were outside of town now; the roads lined by streetlights had given way to darkness. The green glow from the dash lights didn't help his examination but Ean decided something in her manner had a green-around-the-gills aura. His hand shook when he reached to touch her ear. She could snap it off at the wrist faster than he could pull away.

Her eyes rolled and she made a distressed moaning sound.

“Adam?”

“Whatever it is, Ean, try to keep it under control for a few minutes. We have trouble.”

Yes we do, he thought, recognizing where he'd seen that glassy-eyed look Marie sent him. Then, from the corner of his eye he caught the blue light strobing in the mirror.

Shit. Had the clinic reported them?

“Tell me you were speeding,” Ean said. The van slowed, he felt the jolt of tires rolling from pavement to shoulder, heard gravel popping under the wheels.

“I wasn't paying attention to the speed.”

Adam rolled his window down a crack. He warned Ean to keep Marie in the back, quiet and inconspicuous. As if it was possible for a full-grown white tiger to be inconspicuous. But Ean knew what he meant. Say the wrong thing, move the wrong way and you light a fuse that can't be unlit. All that stood between them and a massive tiger hunt, with swat teams and helicopters, were their wits and glass windows that might as well be tissue paper should she bolt. If she sensed any threat at all, death waited in the officer's gun. If they tranquilized her in her precarious state, the babies might not survive.

“We should try to switch her back, Adam.”

“Not enough time,” Adam whispered. “It's too dangerous to her physically and then we would need to

explain why we have a naked, pregnant woman whom we took from the clinic against the doctor's wishes. And if they ask her if she went willingly, what do you think she'd say?" Adam sat straighter and put both hands on the steering wheel.

A flashlight beam scanned the dash and passenger seat. Ean held still, not daring to breathe. Marie put her head in his lap. He could see the officer's face reflected in the mirror.

"Evening officer," Adam said. "Was I going too fast?"

Marie lifted her head. Ean didn't like the interested way her nostrils twitched. He put one finger to his lips. She didn't understand. Her tail rose to twitch with interest too—right next to Adam's ear. So much for hoping she would go unnoticed.

Ean watched the officer's face pale, his eyes round, and his mouth drop open just before Marie rose to investigate.

She poked her head between the seats."Um, this is Marie," Adam said in a deadpan tone, as if he were introducing a family pet rather than a Pantherian tiger. "She's really quite harmless."

Ean hoped that was true. He watched her tail straighten and then cut through the air in a downward arc like a Samurai's sword, leaving his hopes in ribbons.

Her body bunched.

Her back arched.

She made a strangled gurgling sound.

Then she vomited right in Adam's lap.

They didn't come any cooler than Adam. He was ready with a story. "That's a female tiger's way of inviting you to dinner. They normally only do that when they are weaning their cubs. We should feel honored." He nodded respectfully to Marie."Thank you, love. We're not that hungry." And then said to the officer, "I have her transport papers in the glove box. Would you like to see?"

Marie bunched and heaved again. The smell was ripe. Ean cringed and turned his head. He heard the slow drip and splat of liquid running off Adam's lap to the floor.

The officer cleared his throat, then cleared it again. When he spoke, his voice rasped with barely contained laughter.

"My cat gets car sick when we take her to the vet. The old girl may just be having a tough time with the ride."

Ean let out a slow, relieved sigh. A cat lover. And he sounded like a levelheaded guy. He had good taste in pets.

Adam soldiered on. "She's a rare species, pregnant. We're trying to transfer her to a special care facility for the birth."

Marie wretched with impressive agony, throwing a whole-body writhe into it.

The officer cleared his throat again. "It looks like you have your...um...hands full."

"Yes, among other things."

"Do you need a vet or something?"

"I have one right in the back. He just gave her a sedative. She'll be snoring in a few minutes."

Ean pushed up on his knees and peered over Marie's back. He risked a tiny wave. The flashlight beam hit his eyes leaving spots dancing when it veered away.

Marie turned and flopped boneless on the blanket. She rolled to her back, head tipped sideways and moaned. All four paws pointed to the ceiling.

Ean passed Adam the paper sheet they had from the clinic.

"Thank you, Ean." Adam wiped his hands as calmly as if it were a dinner napkin and he was dealing with spilled wine. He dabbed at the muck in his lap.

\* \* \* \* \*

At least Marie was familiar with the house. Adam hoped that gave her some comfort. The new body was another story, getting up the steps on four feet instead of two was not as graceful as he knew Marie would have liked. After a leap and tumble back, she snarled, turned and stalked into the living room and where she tried to stretch out on the sofa. She hung over at both ends. It took some wriggling and adjusting but she finally settled, propping her chin in her paws on one end and curling her rear in so it fit. The night-blackened glass in the picture window sent her reflection back at her. She snarled.

Adam slipped upstairs leaving Ean to watch over Marie. A quick shower and change had him almost presentable. He ran his fingers through damp hair. He wished the mess he'd made of things with Marie could be set right so easily. He felt trapped by guilt on one side and sheer terror of what could happen, what nearly happened, on the other. How had it come to all this?

They'd been lucky. The officer had let them go with a verbal warning about speed. He didn't want to have to count on luck again. It might be too late, but he was going to have to go downstairs to explain the entire situation to Marie.

Ean leaned in the doorway allowing Marie all the space he could while keeping watch. Marie was still on the couch. Adam chose a chair on the far side of the room. Her eyes were closed. Her ears locked on him and followed his movements like little satellite dishes. That and the occasional fishhook curl of her tail, first to the left and then to the right, were the only signs that she was awake.

Adam didn't trust his voice to carry words without them dissolving into a messy emotional puddle in his throat. As for Marie, he wasn't sure what she would understand. He had to keep it simple.

He leaned forward and scrubbed his face with his hands, resting his elbows on his knees. Where to begin? His inability to figure out how to say what needed to be said had landed them in this mess.

He rose and started toward her but she hissed so he sat back down.

“I’m sorry,” he tried.

She snarled again, but he took heart. Sorry was an abstract concept. He might expect her to pick up concrete symbols from speech, like shoe or eat, things she could picture. Then again, she could just hate the sound of his voice.

He could barely remember his first switch to tiger form as an adolescent, with Ean’s parents to guide and teach. He’d grown up knowing who he was in a community that celebrated who they were. He couldn’t begin to imagine what she must be feeling. Terror. Confusion. Hatred. He had to try to cover whatever conclusions she might have drawn.

“I don’t know how much you’ll understand but I’m going to explain anyway.” He paused. She watched him, ears twitching, but made no sound.

“First, and this is very important, Ean and I are not evil wizards who have turned you into a tiger.”

She turned her head to stare out the window again as if she didn’t care what he said but her left ear was cocked toward him and the tip of her tail twitched faster.

“You are Pantherian. That means you are genetically both tiger and human. If you had been raised among our kind you wouldn’t need me to tell you that. You’d be able to switch yourself between species without my help.”

Her tail stopped twitching. She was motionless, alert, listening to him with her entire body. He sent his love to her, opened his heart and let all his guilt and anguish flow toward her.

“Yes,” he said more softly. “Ean and I are tigers too.”

He started to go to her again but she hissed a warning between her teeth, ears laid back, incisors showing. He could have shifted and been safer but he didn’t want her to feel any more threatened than she already did. And Adam’s tiger form was not like any tiger she would have seen. “Don’t worry, I’ll spare you a demonstration.”

He moved around the chair to a window, farther from her. He looked out into the night and wished it could give him some answers, tell him how to win her forgiveness. He tried to imagine how it must feel, to be sick, frightened and all at once have everything you believed about the world tossed aside by the snap of someone’s fingers. A lot like being lost in the dark, he supposed.

And now he was about to yank the rug from under her one more time. He opened his mouth and no sound came. He swallowed, drew a deep breath and turned to face her. He had to look her in the eye when he told her what he’d done.

“I deceived you and you have every right to be mad. But I didn’t do it to gain anything for myself, Marie. I simply wanted to give you the babies you craved.”

Her answer—a soft, frustrated growl—rumbled like distant thunder. He braced himself for the coming storm. “Almost everything they said at the clinic is true. You’re pregnant. Six is a bit unusual but not unheard of, and not particularly dangerous to you or them. I think you’ll be holding our babies in your arms about ten weeks from now.”

He watched her for a clue that she understood. He hadn’t been able to penetrate her mind at all. He

moved closer again and she didn't respond. It was like she was looking through him. He knew, didn't need telepathy to guess which way those mental wheels turned.

"Our babies," he repeated. "Our Pantherian babies."

She exploded from the couch and he jumped back behind the chair.

Marie snarled and stalked him on suddenly steady legs. Intent gleamed in her eyes, his ability to read it blocked by a force of will he had never encountered.

Adam held his ground while his own mind screamed at him to shift. He stepped from behind the chair. He had to establish some kind of trust in order to take care of her. She wouldn't hurt him.

Fury boiled in her stare. A chill spread through his belly. In an eye-blink her head slammed into his chest, knocking him flat on his back. As he suspected, the news her babies weren't human didn't sit well. He hardly dared draw a breath while she towered above him, eyes glowing.

Sweat soaked his t-shirt. Tension sparked and crackled in the air. Visible electric arcs shimmered and went out, like summer lightning. Her power unnerved.

From the corner of his eye he saw Ean's shadow, cast by the hall light.

"Adam, I think she could fry us with a thought."

*Don't give her ideas*, he whispered with his mind, afraid to risk moving his lips to shape words, let alone irritate her further with human speech.

She crouched possessively over Adam, hissing warnings at Ean.

Adam felt Ean raising energy to shift.

*No, Ean.*

He could feel stubbornness in Ean's intention. A hard wall.

*Ean, please?*

Ean wavered.

Marie looked down at Adam. She lifted her right paw and planted it in the middle of Adam's chest. It was as effective as a gun to the head. The claws curled, razor points pressing through his shirt into his skin as the pressure grew. Her paw was bigger than his head. Ean couldn't help now. He could feel his heart leap and thump like a rabbit in a trap. She could scoop it from his chest in less than a heartbeat. She knew it.

What Adam didn't know was how much self-control she had. It took time for the human and tiger consciousness to learn to work together.

A growl rumbled in her chest and vibrated through his bones. She crouched lower, her nose an inch from his and showed him all those sharp teeth, longer and thicker than his fingers. His heart scrabbled under her paw, seeking refuge in his throat. He tried to draw a breath, his lungs burned under her weight.



She might be imprisoned in a body she didn't understand, for reasons she didn't understand, but she was not powerless.

Adam licked his lips, could taste the salty sweat there. Point taken.

She withdrew. She stalked, stiff-legged to the doorway, butted Ean aside and kept going. He heard crashing and the sound of splintering wood.

"That was the dining room chairs," Ean said, sliding his back down the wall to sit in the doorway. "Better them than us. She's gone under the table."

Adam closed his eyes. His heartbeat slowed but his limbs felt like water. "Let's leave her be for now."

"Good plan."

Adam hoped one day they would look back on this and laugh. Right now, they were too scared.

## Chapter Eight

Adam kept a respectful distance from Marie, as much as the tight quarters of a tiger-filled kitchen would allow. He leaned against the counter, coffee in one hand, the other working painful knots from his stiff neck. He and Ean spent the night sleeping in the dining room doorways.

"You remember your first shift?" Ean asked. "For me it was like a perfume store had exploded in my head." He handed Adam a fluffy stack of buckwheat cakes, butter and maple syrup dripped down the edges in amber streams and pooled on the plate.

Adam put the plate on a kitchen chair and waited for Marie to take an interest. The scent of butter, syrup and hotcakes had his mouth watering. He watched her sniff a path from the kitchen door to the hallway. Something more intriguing than breakfast had her attention.

Aware that normal speaking voices jarred her, Adam answered Ean in a soft voice, just above a whisper. "For me it was the sound. I couldn't get over how shifting turned the volume up. The swish of grass under a paw sounded like wind through a cane field."

Marie stepped carefully, her nose glued to the tile, like a train engine fastened to an invisible track. Her tongue flicked out to taste the air, scooping up scent to sample its flavor. She would pause and lift her head slightly, then some new scent would catch her and her nose connected itself to follow a new track. Her tail swayed seductively when she moved.

Ean shot Adam a pained look when she paused to rub her cheek against a doorjamb before passing through. Female scent marked strategic spots around the house in the way a woman might dab perfume behind a knee or an ear. She was torturing them, unaware how her instinctive behavior made them crave her.

Adam followed her while Ean finished preparing breakfast.

In the living room, she rolled on her back and wriggled on the carpet. One paw hooked the coffee table and sent it flying. She lifted her head and blinked at the shattered pieces, then snarled at Adam, as if he

needed reminding her current opinion of him wasn't good. Then she returned to scratching her back.

Adam's clothes weighed on him like chains. He longed to be naked, lying right in the spot where she had rolled, drinking her scent through his pores. His skin itched with the need.

"I could scratch those itches," he offered.

Marie rolled to her feet, teeth bared. The claws of one paw caught in the carpet, distracting her. Marie studied her paw. The tug and lift in the carpet were perceptible as she flexed her claws.

"Let me help—"

She flexed the claws of the other paw and then the scratching reflex took hold. Adam winced as the expensive carpet parted in strips like paper through a shredder.

"I can see we're going to need some rules," Adam muttered and then said louder, as she really got into it, "Stop that."

Ean came up behind him and leaned around him to see what was up.

She looked straight at him, extended her right paw full length and a new patch parted with a sound like a giant zipper opening.

"I think she just dared you to make her."

She left off the carpet and headed for the couch. Was that a gleam in her eyes? Her hindquarters bunched and she crouched.

Adam started forward. "No Marie, you're too..." He thought better of what he was going to say. The word "heavy" echoed in his brain when she leapt, almost gracefully, and landed with a thud on his sofa. The legs popped off and the interior gave way so that Marie sank through to the floor.

She hadn't expected that. She cowered in a defensive crouch and then bolted past them knocking Adam into Ean in her rush to escape. One couch cushion was still attached to her back paw.

More wood cracked and splintered in the next room. The two remaining dining room chairs from the sound of it. And sure enough, they found her under the dining table, the chairs scattered like kindling around the perimeter, the torn cushion in the corner. Her head and shoulders fit under the table and the back half of her hung out. Her tail swished like a furry windshield wiper over gleaming hardwood. The long lace tablecloth trailed to the floor, except where it was draped exotically above her hips. Ean cleared his throat. Adam didn't need to read his mind to know what was on it.

\* \* \* \* \*

From: Adam Kamenev (verrenoirlabs@gmail.com)

To: Jake Sequoia (mmstgermain@gmail.com)

Subject: Hybrid Research

Hi Jake,

I trust my father is well. Knowing his distaste for electronic gadgets, I assume you are still handling communications for him.

I'm doing research on rare genetic traits among Pantherians, specifically the *Panthera tigris* tribe. Would you ask the magus if he has ever seen evidence of leucism (white tigers in case you're wondering) in this tribe? Also, send me any information he might be able to pass on about early attempts to create hybrid species, in particular, around what decade he thinks they may have achieved the capability to produce hybrids.

Thanks,

Adam

From: Jake Sequoia (mmstgermain@gmail.com)

To: Adam Kamenev (verrenoirlabs@gmail.com)

Subject: You knew it wouldn't be that easy

He wants to know what you're on to.

Nice try,

Jake

To: Jake Sequoia (mmstgermain@gmail.com)

From: Adam Kamenev (verrenoirlabs@gmail.com)

Subject: Moi?

I'm not on to anything, at least not anything I want to put in email. In fact, it might be best to leave his answer in the usual cyber drop. I'll come to see him as soon as I can break free of a complicated situation here. He can grill me then. And while I'm thinking of it, there's a database I need purged of certain info and a deposit of funds to be delivered. You know where to find the details.

Thanks,

Adam

To: Adam Kamenev (verrenoirlabs@gmail.com)

From: Jake Sequoia (mmstgermain@gmail.com)

Subject: Done

Now I'm curious. I found the details you left for me. It only took me an hour to unlock the files; you're slipping. There was no data on your kitty at the clinic. So technically, I don't think I've broken any laws for you—yet. Don't worry, the magus has stumbled on a stray kitten of his own and isn't paying attention to the hornet's nest you're sticking your nose in. Take care, Adam, and work fast. You can't keep things from him for long. In fact, if the two of you would put your heads together, you might find you're stalking the same prey.

Always at your service when it is this intriguing,

Jake

\* \* \* \* \*

Adam pushed back from his desk and gazed out the window. A light snowfall painted a lacy curtain on the other side of the glass. Ean had shifted and taken Marie out to play. She was near the edge of the wood, body taut with concentration as she investigated an important bush. She was well camouflaged in the snow, the long shadow of trees the perfect backdrop for her coloring.

Ean was bumping her with his head, prancing playfully, giving every sign that he was interested in sex.

Adam turned away and went back to his work. He wasn't jealous. Pantherians didn't get jealous. Marie wouldn't be thinking like a Pantherian. Her upbringing demanded monogamy. Conception required two males. Raising her babies didn't. He pushed those thoughts firmly away.

So what did Jake mean that his father had found a stray kitten? He tapped a pencil on his notepad. The only information he'd shared about Marie had been her name, the date of her visit to the clinic and the clinic name and address. If there were no details to erase, Jake wouldn't know anything about the current situation. Codekitty was the user name for Marie's web space. If Jake had worked that out, he must realize the programming work he'd been doing for Adam was really for Marie.

Adam thought he had things covered at her job. Jake did the work they left her and Adam uploaded it to the site. He'd concocted a string of stories to make sure her job was there when she wanted to go back. He'd even prepared the way for the sudden appearance of several newborns in Marie's life. After the babies arrived, Marie's fictional sister would pass on due to complications in childbirth and Marie would be named guardian. Plans this complex, especially when humans were involved, rarely proceeded without a hitch.

Ean's vocalizing carried in from the yard. Adam was glad she allowed at least one of them near her. Ean could keep her safe. Marie crooned an answer. The pencil snapped in half. Adam tossed it in the trash basket.

Think. Think. Whatever Jake knew, he was trying to tell Adam that Marie was not a lone aberration. That didn't rule out her being an aberration rather than an experiment that somehow got away. It just made it less likely. He needed to visit his father. He dreaded visiting his father.

Two feline voices rose in harmony. Adam pressed fingertips to his temples. Ean should know better than to be so loud. He sent the thought.

He could not go out there. He couldn't look. He wouldn't think about why he couldn't.

The rabbit scabbled in her box. Adam tried to ignore her too but finally gave in. Lilly had grown two feet and gained twenty five pounds since she'd come to live with them. He should have known better than to give Marie a present he'd originally gotten from his father. She'd started out a harmless little blue-eyed fluff of fur that fit in the palm of his hand. Maybe he should have taken his cue then. Blue eyes weren't a common trait in rabbits.

He kept Lilly in his lab out of Marie's reach. Marie wouldn't harm Lilly, all Pantherians were vegetarians. The rabbit couldn't adjust to the idea of being carried about in a tiger's mouth. He lifted her in his arms, holding her belly up and she fit there in the curve of his arm, making him think of holding his children just so. Intelligence studied him from behind sapphire eyes. There was no mistaking that feeling of a spark, a connection. Lilly was more than a rabbit. She wasn't Pantherian. What did that leave?

\* \* \* \* \*

Ean stayed close but tried not to intrude on her exploration. Marie would get freezer burn on her nose if she kept pushing through the snow like that. It was barely an inch deep. She lifted her head and thrust that long pink tongue out to catch crisp, lacy flakes that danced on her breath before landing and dissolving.

Ean crouched close by. She wouldn't look at him. She didn't like him as a tiger and she usually sulked under the dining room table until he switched back to his human form. But this morning she'd sat with her nose pressed to the kitchen window and he'd told her he'd take her out, but only as a tiger. While he hadn't heard guns today, hunters still worried him.

She was sitting very still now, ears twitching. He guessed she was enchanted by the whispery music of falling snow.

She flopped on her side. She sent him her fiercest look with a warning growl and then flipped over on to her back, wriggling in the snow, four paws batting the air.

Ean relaxed and stretched out on his side, gazing into the distance. The posture an invitation he hoped she would recognize.

She cocked her head to check what he was up to and went still.

Ean watched her without seeming to. Marie stayed on her back but the telling twitch of her tail told him she was confused, agitated. He pictured her curled safe and warm against his side. He wondered if she would understand.

She rolled to her belly and studied him, the pull of instinct proving stronger than her fear. She crept closer, pausing, looking about. She mewed once, a soft confused sound so different from her usual snarls and hisses that Ean thought he might have imagined it. She inched forward and mewed again.

Ean made no outward response. He kept his breathing soft and shallow. He trained his gaze on the river and kept it there, with only occasional peeks to follow her progress. With supreme effort he managed to keep his tail still, draped nonchalantly over his rear paws.

Marie's ears were in radar mode, scanning constantly for a hint of danger. Her tail whipped and writhed like a snake, sending plumes of white powder into the air.

She'd approached to the point that her head was a foot away from his right front paw. She stretched her neck as far as she could. It was bad tiger etiquette, bad form. It was much safer to start explorations of another tiger at the back end. If he meant her harm the quick swipe of a paw or snap of jaws could have delivered it. Later. Later he would teach her defenses. Now the only thing he wanted to teach her was love.

Her tongue tasted the air near him. Her fur stood straight up and he noted the rippling wave of her skin moving as her entire body tested the charged air around him. She stretched more and gave his paw a tentative lick. She looked up at him then, wide blue eyes unblinking.

A spark leapt from her eyes into him. His heart went to marshmallow and his lower half went to beast. He would do anything to please her. To have her. Need pulsed through his veins, a need to be close, to rub his fur against hers. He closed his eyes against her stare.

She licked again, a long stroke covering his paw and up his foreleg. It was the wrong direction but he didn't care. He peeked at her. Her pink tongue made wide, wet furrows. Her eyes were closed and she had that same look she got when he fed her cinnamon rolls hot from the oven and she licked the icing that dripped from his fingers. He felt savored.

He sang a mating song, his voice riding up and down the notes like fingers teasing sound from the strings of a guitar, up and down the scale, sending his love to resonate in the hollows of her bones. She answered. The music of their voices wrapping round each other created energy that softened the whole body, like a massage from the inside.

Adam's sharp warning zapped through Ean's brain. He fell silent and, taking her cue from him, so did she. They were nose-to-nose now. Falling snow whispered love when it kissed the earth. The wind whispered love to the trees. She started to purr and he allowed a soft rumble of his own to play harmony along with hers.

Resentment melted away as easily as snowflakes on her nose. A sweet sense of peace, of coming home rose up to take its place. The homecoming feeling had been sneaking up on Marie from her first day as a tiger, but she had refused to trust it, or them.

Playing in the snow with Ean, something tugged her so hard that it focused her vision, like looking through new glasses to discover a world that had always been there but your eyes couldn't see. She really was a tiger. And she was more than that. *This is who I am*, she thought. *This is where I fit.*

She crept close carefully, afraid he might disappear, and scared that even with joy unleashing a thousand butterflies in her belly, she could still be wrong.

She sniffed the fur on his paw and snowflakes went up her nose making her sneeze. He stayed still, letting her learn him. She turned her head toward the river, to see what fascinated him. She tried to imagine what it must be like to have grown up as him. Either one, man or tiger held power to be marveled over. Both at once—incomparable.

He sang his tiger song and a memory rose, three tigers in the river, the moon spotlighting their play. She remembered swirling water and the sweet weight of a male over her, the electric thrust of male tiger inside her. Her sheath contracted and moistened with the memory. She sang with Ean, the memory of them singing under the moon welling up in her.

Energy buzzed through her body, moved up through the pads of her paws right out to the tips of her fur. When he stopped singing, she purred and slid her body along his. Something ancient guided her, a knowledge that seemed to creep up from the earth itself. She needed to rub against things, against the trees, slide her body through the snow, rub her cheek against Ean's.

He huffed affectionately.

She mewed back.

She needed to lick. He rolled onto his back and she licked his chest. The sensation of licking his belly was hypnotic. Each time she pulled her tongue back into her mouth it ached to stroke more fur. She could feel his heart thump under warm skin and solid bone. It beat like a drum skin, his life force singing its own song. When her tongue traveled lower to swipe over his genitals, he sprang away and she chased after.

When he turned back on her, she dropped on her belly and he skidded to a halt in front of her, ears pricked forward. Lovingly he licked her face, then her ears and the top of her head. She trembled when he moved above her, continuing to give her head attentive licks while he moved behind her. That hot liquid craving burned in her sheath, the way it had when she was under him in a warm bed. Instinct glued her belly to the ground, tipped her hips to receive him, tail draped daintily to the side. She mewed. Ean got the message.

She wouldn't trade a warm bed for this moment, with the snow cool and soft beneath her, the wind ruffling her fur and Ean mounting her. He made her hot enough to melt snow.

Love hummed in her. The weight on her back, the jet engine purr of her mate, shook loose the last doubts.

She pressed back into him and sang her love song. His teeth clamped onto her neck, electric pleasure sizzled through her when his cock found her sheath. She squeezed him, welcoming the startled huff and then the deep-chested rumble that followed.

Ean's hindquarters drove like a piston. Thrusts rippled through her. She held tight each time he withdrew, reveling in the freedom. No vortex spinning, no force threatening to shatter her or snatch her away. His furred body sliding against her back made her arch hers, tip her head back and sing her pleasure to the sky while her lover's cock jerked and filled her with his.

\* \* \* \* \*

Adam created a new folder in the private area on Marie's web space. He couldn't explain the obsessive need to cover his tracks and leave no traces on his personal computer. It's not like he was in danger of being arrested for impersonating a human. Still, better safe... If any of these files were discovered on the internet, no one would take a second look. He needed to leave her a message. He labeled the folder "waiting" and opened a fresh document. It wouldn't be long before they could talk things over, but something pressed at him, a sense that he shouldn't take opportunity for granted.

For Marie,

There are so many things I wish I could say, my love. I hate this wall between us. I don't blame you for it. Never think that.

I don't know how you feel about this new body of yours. Proud I hope. Please be happy. You are glorious.

What would make you love who you are, sweetheart? The babies grow stronger with each week. I sneak up close sometimes when you sleep and I can feel them there, bright little bundles of energy turning and tumbling. I long to lay my head against your side, feel them moving in you. It's just about two more weeks now and we can hold them, look into their eyes, feel tiny fingers curl around our own, tickle rows of little pink toes.

I love them fiercely already. I know this isn't easy. You had no way to prepare. I only hope you can accept us. Too late, it has occurred to me you won't want these babies of ours, you won't want my babies. Will you hate us? Are we too alien? I will have to wait on your answer.

Know this, I love you. Always.

Adam

He closed the file and pushed back from the desk. Lilly slept curled at his feet. He ran his hand over her soft fur and considered the other big source of his depression. Marie carried females. Six daughters. No sons.

A rippling in the air around the mirror portal shook him from his thoughts. The drape fell away and a naked woman tumbled through. She stood, spun about in a tipsy circle then fell, landing on her backside with a thump. She pushed strawberry blonde hair from her eyes and looked up at Adam. Her eyes were a murky blue and her cheeks flushed. Her delicate fingers went to her head.

"Oh...I think... Sorry my head is spinning." She squinted at him, leaning a bit too far forward. "Adam?"

\* \* \* \* \*

They kept hot peppermint tea, by the gallon, ready on the back of the stove.

Adam set a cup on the table and sweetened it with honey while Maya went to splash cold water on her face in the powder room. She shuffled into the kitchen, her short hair curling in damp tendrils around her face. She was still naked.

Adam yanked off his t-shirt and tossed it to her. He motioned toward the tea and turned away to make coffee for himself.

"Are you okay, Adam?" The question was muffled by the shirt over her head. He kept his back to her.

"Yes." The answer came out sharper than he meant it. He poured the last of the coffee into his mug and gulped scalding brew.

When he turned back, Maya was tugging the t-shirt low on her thighs, watching him cautiously, lips pursed.



“What?”

“That’s what I was wondering,” she said. “What happened to you?” Her eyes appraised, running from the top of his head down to his sweatpants and bare feet. And then back to his pants. “Turquoise sweatpants aren’t you. And those look a bit small.”

He ran a hand over his rumpled hair and scrubbed at his whiskered face. It irritated him that she took a step back when he took one forward. Surely Ean looked worse than this most of the time.

“I wasn’t expecting company.”

She shrugged and pulled out a chair. “I’m looking for Ean. Have you seen him?”

Her color was coming back. Crossing dimensions induced vertigo until you got used to it. And Maya wouldn’t be used to it.

“He’s here.”

“Really?” Her face lit. “Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

“We’ve been busy.” It was time to turn the conversation away from his personal life. “But more important, why didn’t you let me know you were coming? And how did you learn to travel through the mirror?” Only males possessed that skill. Females rarely left the homeland and never without a male to transport them.

She poked her bottom lip out in a fake pout. Mischievousness danced in her eyes. There was something else, a weight to her mood. The mischief a cover for something else.

“Keep talking like that and you’ll hurt my feelings. I thought you might have missed me.” There was a slight quaver in her voice. Adam sat up straighter, taking in for the first time the puffy eyes, dark circles, unusual thinness.

“What’s up, My?” He used the nickname he’d used for her when she was a kid tagging after him with a fly’s persistence. Maya had never taken well to the restrictions that held her back from the adventures and knowledge reserved for males. Females were precious and scarce. Adam hadn’t always appreciated the tribal need to protect and guard them from all harm. He had helped Maya explore freedoms no one else would allow her, taught her more than he should have. Things changed.

She shrugged. “A little tension with the folks. I thought Ean might let me hang out with him for a few weeks.” She blew on her tea. Her tone was too casual. “I didn’t realize he was here with you. I don’t want to intrude.”

Adam flopped back in his chair, took a sip of coffee and considered. Maya didn’t want to intrude? Since when? All he needed was another bundle of problems. At the same time, an extra pair of hands could prove handy. He needed to get away and he didn’t want to leave the full weight of caring for Marie on Ean.

Then again, Maya had shown up in a manner that suggested more than your ordinary family spat. And she’d acquired some skills she shouldn’t have.

“Answer me about the mirror, Maya. It takes years of apprenticing to attain that skill.”

“Maybe it does for a male,” she grumbled. “Who knows what a female can do? All they are allowed is the honor of birthing and raising babies.”

Adam rolled his eyes and decided she’d bribed someone like Jake to guide her through. “You’re in luck. Ean and I could use an extra pair of hands.”

He gave her an abbreviated version of events up to that point. Maya was quick to notice details he’d rather not think about.

“Adam, that’s a violation of the reproductive code. You only get one wife. If your wife dies that’s it.”

Another reason males didn’t allow females to travel alone. Maya should be in the care of loving mates by now. If she didn’t choose soon, some would be chosen for her. He tried to remember, did she pass the age of consent this year or next? He decided he didn’t want to know the answer to that question today. “Marie wasn’t raised in the tribe. They can’t apply laws to her that she didn’t know about.”

“They could apply them to you. They could take your babies.”

He looked up, his gaze held hers. “They won’t.”

“Because you’re the magus’ son?”

“They didn’t let that stop them when they took me from my mother. That law is meant to punish females for allowing an unsanctioned mating.”

“It’s meant to terrify them into submitting to ridiculous rules, you mean.” Maya stirred her tea. The silver clanked sharply against the china. Adam regretted his bluntness. If anyone supported Maya’s crusade against the unfair restrictions on her sex it was Adam. It was only Adam for the most part. And on some things, he wouldn’t stand behind her either. He wondered how his daughters would change his opinions. He hoped he would have a chance to find out.

“Her babies are female,” he said, the words like weights in his chest that took effort to drag out. “Six little ones and not one male.”

Maya’s head snapped up. Her eyes glistened. He saw his own fear mirrored there. Daughters, longed for by the tribe, dreaded by the parents.

She reached out and put her hand in his. “You said she is different, new blood. That might be a blessing. It might be enough to prevent the wasting sickness.”

He squeezed her hand tight and closed his eyes. The odds of all six females surviving to maturity were impossible. They both knew that.

“Does Ean know?”

Adam shook his head. “I haven’t had the heart to tell him. And Marie knows nothing about life in the Pantherian world.”

A commotion outside ended the conversation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ean opened the kitchen door and Marie bounced in shaking snow from her fur.

A strange scent warned her even before her eyes focused on the young blonde woman. A pretty woman, wearing only Adam's shirt.

She looked at Adam. He wasn't wearing a shirt. Her eyes narrowed.

Ean grabbed his own pants from the back of a kitchen chair. "Maya? What and who brings us the pleasure of your company?"

Marie's fur rose. So, this was how they expected things to be? They could just bring in a strange woman and Marie would calmly accept it? Like she calmly accepted being turned into a tiger? Like she calmly accepted being held prisoner?

A snarl swelled in her chest and ripped loose in a roar. The windows rattled.

Marie was so furious she rattled.

Adam looked shocked, then annoyed, then angry. He rose and shoved his chair back.

"This is perfect. You can't possibly think—" He jabbed a finger in the direction of the blonde's chest. His hand shook. Then he yanked it back and ran both hands through his hair. He looked at Ean. "I have to get out of here. Maya will help you out." He ducked down the stairs to his basement lab.

"Adam," Ean called after him. "Adam, wait..." He ran after Adam, leaving Marie to deal with Blondie.

Blondie licked her lips and made a nervous little hiccup sound. The crooked grimace she pasted on her face was apparently her idea of a smile.

"It was rude of them not to introduce us," she said. She held out a hand, palm up.

Marie softened. She would never have been so gracious if she'd been left alone with a strange tiger, or any tiger. She sniffed the offered palm.

"I'm Maya, Ean's sister. I'm kind of Adam's sister too, but not by blood. That's a long story." Marie stared at her. Maya withdrew her hand, put it in her lap and took a sip of tea.

Marie sat back on her haunches and looked around. She was never good at small talk and not being able to talk made her more self-conscious.

Maya kept her eyes politely on her teacup and seemed quite comfortable with one-sided conversations. "I don't know how you've managed to flap the unflappable Adam. It's good to see his human side. But, tell me one thing. This has been bugging me since I got here. Is Adam wearing your sweatpants?"

Chapter Nine

Adam's nerves were as jangled and twisted as the contents of the wasteland Jake called a living room. Computer cases spilled their innards across a couch that leaked stuffing. Cables snaked under chair legs and nested in corners. Manuals and note pads teetered in a heap that dangled over the edges of what Adam suspected was a table. He and his father circled the scrap pile, looking like black-robed monks come to say a blessing over the carcass-strewn aftermath of a robot war.

"You called me here because you have a sudden burning desire to know about the parentage of a rabbit?" his father asked.

That set Adam back. For unexplained reasons, the magus, Marcus St. Germain, millennial being, great leader, most revered of all Pantherians, appeared distracted and annoyed.

People got distracted. Adam had a major distraction gnawing away at his own heart. People got annoyed. Ordinary mortals did. And while the magus insisted he was mortal (and just like anyone else over the age of a hundred, denied he was as old as he was), Adam's father never got annoyed or distracted. It was the most annoying thing about him.

Adam couldn't afford to be distracted now. He needed to stick to the subject of the rabbit. "Among other things, yes. I need to know where the rabbit came from."

His own tone had an uncharacteristic bite that made his father turn and lift one dark brow. It was like looking into a mirror. No one knew how the magus retained youth. Jake said it had to do with crossing through dimensions and relativity. Adam thought it had more to do with genetics.

Most people took them to be brothers—some had suggested twins. His father found the confusion amusing. Adam did not.

"And I didn't call you here," he continued, "I asked Jake where I could find you and he sent me up the stairs to this." Adam nudged a power supply with his toe. "I would have come to you."

His father looked uncomfortable. "Yes, well this is probably the better meeting place." There was nowhere to sit. Adam was about to ask what Jake was working on when his father decided to answer the first question.

"She came from a facility in Romania." His father wandered toward Jake's kitchen. "We might find an empty chair in here. We can talk over lunch."

Adam lifted his robe and stepped over a pile of tiny gears and motors. They were both dressed in black robes kept for guests dropping in through the dimensional portal. Adam tried to adjust the ill-fitting garment's belt in a way that he wouldn't trip over the dragging hem.

"We need to come up with a method to transport inanimate objects through the portals. Starting with our own clothes."

"I think Jake's working on that."

Adam glanced back at the scrap heap and thought maybe he preferred arriving naked.

There was a pot of fresh coffee waiting for them but the magus filled the kettle and set it to boil. He made no explanation for why this apartment served better than his own house. Something unusual was going on. Another time, Adam might have pressed to find out what. The magus always engaged his

apprentices in odd experiments—but he had no love for computers.

For now, Adam was happy to turn his attention to finding a wedge of cheese and some apples in the fridge. His father sliced a loaf of dark bread he'd found wrapped in a clean towel on the counter.

“So this Romanian facility specialized in genetics research?”

“You didn’t have to come here to figure that out.”

No, but Adam wasn’t ready to unwrap the secrets that brought him here.

“You still have the other bunnies?” Adam found a knife in a drawer. The sharp blade parted the apples with crisp snapping sounds. He filled a plate with paper-thin apple slices and fat squares of cheddar. His father was melting butter in a skillet.

“I gave all the bunnies away. And would you believe, everyone blessed by my generosity has returned to complain?”

Adam layered apples and cheese between bread slices. “Their size is a bit of a shock. And I’m not sure Lilly is done growing.”

His father eased the sandwiches into the sizzling butter and put a lid over the pan. “No one complained about size. It’s the teleporting. And while teleporting bunnies can be troublesome, I would think Pantherians could be more tolerant of such aberrations.”

“Teleporting?” Adam rolled his eyes. Lucky for him, Lilly hadn’t inherited that talent. He didn’t want to think about explaining that to Marie.

His father smiled and took plates from the cupboard. “I don’t think the teleporting was part of the protocol in the experiment that produced the bunnies. The researchers never discovered that bonus. I stole the rabbits to test and make sure no Pantherians were in the mix that created them.”

“And?” Adam checked the sandwiches and turned them to brown on the other side.

“We have teleporting rabbit/human chimera—not Pantherians.”

They sat to wait while the meal cooked.

“Her brain?” Adam asked.

“They injected the embryos with human neurons.”

Adam’s hands went to fists and his stomach churned. The implications were unconscionable. “Tell me you destroyed that lab.”

“To what purpose? They would build another, somewhere else perhaps, make it more difficult to penetrate. We can’t stop this, Adam. Some lessons are only learned by making bad choices. They will reap and learn.”

And that was it? They were supposed to sit back and let scientists play mix and match with species as if they were snapping together Legos?

“So,” his father said, as if they had exhausted the subject of cross species research. “Why do I think this is about a woman instead of a rabbit? Or would a white tiger be more accurate?”

“Not a woman. A female Pantherian.”

“There are no Pantherians with the leucistic trait, Adam.”

Adam got up to take their sandwiches from the heat. “There didn’t used to be teleporting rabbits with human brains either.” He didn’t want to consider that Marie had been created in such a place. And yet, she was the second chance at a family that could not have come to him through normal channels. He didn’t know what to do with that idea. He decided to change the subject.

“Jake said you had stumbled upon a stray cat of your own.”

“A stray. Not necessarily a cat.”

“What then?”

His father shrugged. Adam put the plates on the table. His father picked up his perfectly grilled sandwich, his grip causing melted cheese to ooze from the edges. A tangy apple scent rose on a wisp of steam. He turned it over, seeming to study it, but Adam thought his mind was turning over something else. The magus put it back on the plate, untouched.

“I find it a little odd that we should both run across strays in an area so far away from the usual Pantherian stomping grounds,” he told Adam.

The kettle whistled and his father hopped up to busy himself fixing tea. Adam picked up his sandwich, his own appetite gone, but he knew there was a long night ahead for him and this might be the last chance to eat. He wondered what the weather would be like in Romania.

His teeth sank into perfection, tart apples, mellow cheese. He closed his eyes and chewed. Little pleasures kept him sane in an insane world. His father put a mug of tea in front of him, black tea with cinnamon spice. Hot enough to scald his tonsils, just the way he liked it.

“You don’t even have to draw blood for a DNA test,” Adam said when his father sat and picked up his sandwich again, took a bite. “Whoever she is, you don’t need her permission. Get a hair sample, a saliva sample. You could just do it.”

“Procedure doesn’t require it, principles do,” his father said around a mouthful.

It was a direct hit. Adam put his sandwich down. “You can’t always do the right thing by doing things the right way.”

And that was particularly true, he thought, when you were trying to right someone else’s wrongs.

\* \* \* \* \*

“How can you think to bring children into this house?” Maya had her hands on her hips and she glared at Ean over the heap of laundry he was trying to collect from the spare room’s bed.

“We haven’t had much time to deal with laundry lately. We wash it, put it here, find what we need when we need it.”

“Yes, I’ve seen how well this system is working.”

Marie circled behind them, more interested in following Lilly than in their argument. Lilly had hopped onto the window seat. Marie looked out at the leaf-strewn lawn and bare winter woods. The snow never stayed long and she’d developed a fondness for rolling in it. The cars were parked in the drive—hers, the box van they’d brought her home in and Adam’s. She wondered who had brought it from the clinic. But more important, where was Adam?

He’d been gone two days. She’d sniffed her way through every room in the house and no Adam. She hadn’t seen him go outside.

Lilly pressed her paws to the glass, little nose wiggling, her long floppy ears jiggling in the way they did when she concentrated. Maya’s voice rose sharply behind them, drawing Marie’s attention.

“And you haven’t had time to deal with preparing a room for the babies? Six babies Ean! Will you put them in cardboard boxes?”

Ean was filling a couple of cartons with the laundry she was fussing about. He set them in the hall. “There, the bed is empty. Are you happy?”

Marie turned back. Lilly was gone. But not really gone. Marie could still smell her warm bunny scent mingled with the cedar that lingered from her bedding. Then Lilly materialized right in front of Marie’s eyes, like Captain Kirk beaming down from a ship. Marie sat back on her haunches and blinked. Maya and Ean were in the hall.

Maya grabbed Ean’s hand and led him back into the room. She pointed to the towers of cartons filled with supplies and equipment, overflow from Adam’s lab. “This will be a nursery by the end of the week, Ean. Make it happen.”

Marie licked Lilly’s face to be sure she was real. The bunny scrubbed at her cheek with the back of one paw then disappeared again. This time she wasn’t there. Marie tested the empty air with her tongue. No Lilly.

Ean massaged a spot between his brows. “You can go home now, Maya. I can take it from here.”

Marie slid between them and pressed her body against Maya’s knees, leaning there to get attention. Maya stroked her head. “Our fathers raised them better than this, sweetie. I promise.”

“Adam usually organizes things,” Ean said. “I don’t know what’s been up with him lately.”

Maya was right. They had let things get out of hand and time was running out. From what Marie could gather in the assorted confrontations that passed for communication between this brother and sister, housework was a man’s responsibility. She liked that idea. It explained why Adam and Ean fell over themselves to keep her from lifting a finger around the house in the days before she was a tiger.

Childrearing, or cubrearing—or was it kittens for tigers? Whatever it was, it was handled by women.

“What do babies need?” Ean asked.

Maya sighed, rolled her eyes and held out a hand, palm up. “Just give me a credit card and I’ll order some stuff online.”

“There’s one in Adam’s desk drawer.”

“While I do that, you do something about the shredded carpeting, the broken furniture and all of this,” she said, indicating the laundry, Adam’s “temporary” storeroom and a gathering of dust bunnies with a sweeping gesture.

“Come on, Marie,” she said, “we have shopping to do.” Marie glanced back to the window seat. Lilly hadn’t reappeared.

“Oh no you don’t,” Ean said catching her arm. “You shop when I fix dinner. For now, you help here.”

“Do housework?” She stepped back.

“Well you keep insisting you don’t want a man so you better learn to do a man’s jobs.” Ean slapped a cardboard box in her hands. “You can start by sorting the clothes.”

Marie sniffed a path around the perimeter of the bed. No Lilly. Marie was sure she couldn’t have fit under there anyway.

“Like I could actually escape bonding,” Maya grumbled. “As soon as they catch up with me I’m doomed. They should call it bondage.”

Ean flipped on the light and surveyed the space. Marie studied it too. It would be cheerfully sunny most of the day. Once they cleared it of cartons and clutter, it would make a great nursery.

Marie wandered between stacks of boxes, sniffing, pausing here and there.

“I think Marie agrees with your choice of rooms,” Ean said.

Marie looked around a box tower. Maya was still staring glumly into the carton Ean had pressed on her. He ruffled her hair, then bent to drag cartons away from the window. “Here, come sit at the window seat while you fold those. You can keep me company.”

It took him twenty minutes to sort and stack half the supplies in the hall. They could be carried down and put away later. At least he said that was the plan. Maya had managed to fold four towels in that time. Marie had given up the search for Lilly and leaned loyally against Maya’s knees, chin propped on the window seat where she could watch for Adam.

With Adam around every day she hadn’t been able to think beyond her fury. When he was gone, it was like an arm or a leg was missing. He’d grown into a part of her somewhere in this romance of theirs and she’d taken him for granted as much as she had once taken fingers for granted. She missed him more than she missed her fingers.

Ean huffed displeasure, folding his arms over his chest, leaning in the doorway with an attitude that said he was about to lecture Maya. Maya didn’t notice. She was wrestling with a flannel shirt. She brushed at a tear with the back of her hand, shook it out and tried again.



Ean pushed away from the door, his furrowed brow smoothing.

“Hey, what’s this?” He came to sit with them. Marie lifted her head to give him room and nestled into Maya’s warm lap instead. Maya shrugged and hastily folded the shirt in half, then over again and set it on the stack of towels. Her hands curled into Marie’s fur. Marie could have done a better folding job with her paws but Ean was feeling sorry for Maya and didn’t point that out.

“You want to tell me why you’re here on your own?”

A tear splashed on Marie’s nose. She resisted the urge to shake it off. Maya shook her head and another tear disappeared in Marie’s fur.

“If you know, you will be in more trouble,” Maya said.

“Do you think anyone would believe me if I said I don’t know what happened with my sister?”

She sighed and shook her head again.

“So spill it.”

“I refused to choose my mates, so the reproductive council assigned a pair.”

Ean patted her knee. “It’s not the end of the world you know. Not if you are serious about not wanting a mate. Stay home with the folks and refuse to consummate the union.”

“You’ve been away a long time, Ean.”

Marie removed her head to rub away a fresh shower of tears. She rubbed her cheek against Maya’s leg. She was wearing a pair of Marie’s jeans that were way too big for her.

“What does that mean? What’s changed?” Ean asked.

“Everyone is getting nervous. Fewer females to go around could mean the end of the tribe. Some tribes don’t have enough females to recover their numbers. The situation for tigers isn’t that bad yet, but everyone is worried.”

“And?”

Maya lifted her shoulders, taking breath in a gulp and then letting it go in a tearful shudder. She swallowed and sighed again without explaining. Marie put her head back in Maya’s lap.

Maya’s hands stroked Marie, rapid nervous brushings. Ean reached out, put his hands over hers to still them and waited.

“They were really angry about my refusal. Mostly they were angry that I push for changes the males don’t want.” Marie could feel Maya’s anger spread, a tension that twitched in her belly and spread out through her limbs. “They had a big meeting and made changes to the code. I can’t refuse my mates.”

“I don’t understand. You can’t refuse your mates? What? Do they force you?”

Maya just looked at him, her hands tightly fisted inside Ean’s.

He put his hands on her shoulders, gave her a tiny shake. “Did they force you, Maya?”

She shook her head. Her hands clenched and unclenched, pulling at Marie’s fur. “If I do not agree to a mating, they will use artificial insemination. I was ordered to present myself for testing so they could monitor my cycle and impregnate me when my body was biologically receptive.”

“When your body is receptive!” Ean let go of her. His mouth opened and closed and opened again. “How could they? Like human zookeepers! How dare they?”

He clutched her hands again, along with tufts of Marie’s fur. Marie winced. “Surely the magus never agreed to this.”

“He’s not the king, Ean. He’s just a wise old Pantherian. I doubt he knows about the changes.”

“Of course not. You don’t call in the wise man to approve idiocy.”

Marie inched out from under their hands and moved a safe distance away.

“They will not do this to you, Maya. I won’t stand for it. Neither will Adam. Who knows you’re here? How did you get here?”

Maya glanced at Marie, then looked out the window. “Someone helped me get away. I promised not to say who. No one else knows.”

“I won’t ask you to break that trust, but if they ever need anything you let me know.”

She nodded. “The thing is, Ean, I can’t stay here. You and Adam already broke the law. He doesn’t think they’ll enforce it. But things are different now. The tribe is desperate.”

Fresh tears poured down her face. Marie went to lick them away and nuzzled Maya’s chest gently with her head. Ean hugged them both. “We’re family and we’ll stick together.”

Marie wriggled free.

“Harboring me will make it worse for you,” Maya said.

The Knights of the Round Table had nothing on Ean. Marie knew there were broader implications to what Maya revealed, implications that would involve her. She was also certain that Ean in gallant-mode could fend off any fire-breathing dragons some distant council might send their way. And since her world now included such things as tiger people and disappearing bunnies, a dragon might not be farfetched. The defenses Ean outlined indicated a threat much easier to manage than dragons.

“First, no one knows we’re here or anything about Marie and the little ones. We hadn’t planned to send out birth announcements. As for you, everyone will be looking for you back home. It will never occur to them that you made it across the ocean to Adam.”

Maya dried her face on a towel. “You’re probably right. But maybe we better not charge a bunch of baby stuff on Adam’s card.”

“True. I’ll get cash from an ATM and shop at several different stores.” He ruffled Maya’s hair again.

“Make me a list.” Ean went to the hall and grabbed up a couple of cartons. Marie followed him down to Adam’s lab.

Lilly was perched in the chair in front of Adam’s desk. Marie blinked. She was certain Lilly hadn’t gone out the door. When Ean went back up the stairs Marie stayed with Lilly. The bunny waited until Marie touched noses with her and then she vanished but only to the eye. Marie still felt the presence and was aware of the change, like a cellular humming. She could imitate the pitch easily enough, making a sound that started in her throat, spread down her tongue, to her teeth and into her bones. It was a deliciously pleasant sensation, like the soft lazy buzz that moved through her body when she was aroused, only stronger, like a chord playing instead of a note. And then to her complete surprise, her reflection in the window vanished and she could see Lilly.

Lilly wiggled her ears, her pitch changed and Marie saw her swoosh through the ceiling to the kitchen. Marie flicked her own ears and kept humming, searching for just the right pitch and swoosh. She was headed for the ceiling. She cringed, faltering and bumped her head, but found her pitch and continued through it like it was no more than air.

She stopped humming while she was still a couple of inches above the kitchen floor and landed with a thump. She was going to have to work on her landings.

Lilly thumped her foot on the floor, something she usually did when she was frightened but Marie knew she could beam herself elsewhere if she were afraid. No, she realized as Lilly tipped her head sideways, her blue eyes sparking with a mischievous gleam, that thumping was applause.

They launched into a game of cat and rabbit, flashing in and out of rooms, but Lilly was always careful not to beam in or out in front of Ean or Maya. Marie decided to keep her secret. After an hour Marie gave up the chase, the babies were tossing and turning madly in her belly. Dematerializing might not be good for them.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Adam emerged from the portal, he fell over something in front of it and staggered into a pillar of cartons that had sprouted in his absence. For a moment, he thought he’d made a wrong turn.

“Hmm. What?” Ean’s voice, a sleepy mumble on the other side of the barrier. The desk lamp came on. Adam sucked in his belly and slid between two tipsy stacks. He grabbed his pants from a clothes hook by the lab door.

Ean was at his desk, a sheaf of printed paper in one hand, the other scrubbing at bloodshot eyes. He had an odd set of creases down one side of his face, as if he had been sleeping with the keyboard as his pillow.

Adam looked around, dismayed. His lab looked like a bulk goods warehouse.

“Ean,” he hissed between his teeth. “I’ve only been gone a week. How could you let things get this out of control in seven days?” He shook out the sweats and yanked them on.

“Hey, you should have seen the place two days ago. Where’ve you been?”

“Romania. Don’t change the subject. What is all this?”

“Romania? What’s in Romania?”

Lilly batted at Adam’s pants leg. He looked down into her wise blue eyes and bent to lift her to his shoulder. “A little place called hell.” He stroked Lilly’s back.

Ean looked thoughtful. “Hell keeps popping up where you’d least expect. Did you find out much?”

“I think we can safely assume that Marie didn’t come from Romania.” Adam navigated the maze and put Lilly in her playpen. “Lilly did though. She is chimera, human and rabbit. The techniques they used to produce her are not sophisticated enough to produce Pantherians. Not yet.”

Adam read the label on a box. “What are buntings?”

“A baby thing.” Ean flipped through his papers and scratched something out with a pen.

“Are they safe to sit on?”

“Probably.”

Adam sat. He was more than annoyed by the intrusion on his space. Next, they’d be putting his desk in the garage.

“So where did Marie come from?” Ean asked.

“Ask me something easy, like who created the heavens and the earth.”

“Give it your best shot.”

Adam tipped his head back. There was a dent in the ceiling tile above him. Lilly scrabbled in the corner of her pen. When he looked her way she ducked under her baby blanket, her fluffy tail still visible just under the pink satin edging.

“Adam?”

“Hmm? Right. I think Marie is an aberration, an abandoned Pantherian baby that developed the white tiger mutation in the random way any mutation develops.” Adam yawned. He hadn’t slept in two days. He tried to keep the rest of the explanation brief.

“My father thinks it’s likely a pair of Pantherian males mated with a naturally occurring human chimera. It’s possible such a female could conceive in a Pantherian triad. The unique aspects of Marie’s genetics could have come from that combination. The unexpected pregnancy would never have been believed by the fathers. The mother found herself in a bad situation, couldn’t raise her baby. You can take it from there.”

Ean tossed his pencil on the desk and leaned forward. “She wouldn’t have multiples?”

Adam shrugged. “Who knows? It seems unlikely she’d have one baby, but not impossible. If she had twins, it wouldn’t have caused any unusual notice. But we are not talking about a situation with any unique markers that could stand out and point to Marie’s parents.” He looked around again. “Now, about my lab?”

“Most of this stuff is your supplies. We had to get them out of the way to get the nursery ready.”

“And the rest of it?” He tapped the box he was sitting on.

“Diapers, formula, car seats. Babies need a lot of gear.”

“And you couldn’t put some of the gear in the garage?”

“We did.”

Adam pinched the bridge of his nose. The beginnings of a headache throbbed behind his eyes.

“We’ll sort it out better tomorrow.” Ean stood up and stretched. “So we’re at a dead end with Marie’s biological parents?”

Adam led the way out of the lab and up the stairs into the kitchen. “I can’t think of any new avenues to investigate.” He shouldn’t feel annoyed about the lab. It wasn’t like they were packing him up and moving him out of his house. But it felt that way.

Adam paused at the dining room door. He was surprised Marie wasn’t under the table. The soft murmur of the television led him down the hall.

Maya dozed, tucked under a blanket on the couch, while an infomercial for wrinkle cream blared. Ean turned off the set. The drapes drawn over the sliding door flapped.

“Why is the door to the deck open?” Adam asked.

“Marie’s been restless all evening. It’s the only place she would settle.” The deck was screened so they’d let her out whenever she wanted. She particularly liked to be out in the evenings. Adam went to call her in and the words froze in his throat. The screen at the far end of the deck was shredded. Marie wasn’t there.

## Chapter Ten

It was an icy snow, little pellets that stung when she inhaled. It hissed and swirled around her. The drifts were cool against her aching paws. A faint light filtered through, edging the black night toward a milky dawn. Marie wanted to be away before the light came. Need pressed her. She waited on the riverbank for the slow tightening across her belly to peak, then ease back. She slipped into the water, the ice cold easing the ache in her swollen nipples and swollen body. Her skin had stretched so tight over her growing belly Marie thought it might part down the middle like a zipper if she dared breathe too deep.

She wanted to stay there, float in the swirling pool, but anxiety gnawed. She needed to find a place, something dark, private, away from others. She scrambled up the opposite bank and moved into the woods. The tightening came again, the episodes moving closer together. The Marie she recognized slipped further away with each contraction, and the tiger instinct, a more primitive knowledge, took over.

She tipped her head and sniffed the breeze. Her fur rose. She wasn’t alone in the woods. Men. Two men and their dogs. Her heart quickened and she pressed on, not stopping when the pain rose.

\* \* \* \* \*

The snow dwindled to flurries making her easier to track. The sun was rising, a milky presence behind pregnant clouds. Ean wished he could drag it from the sky and bury it or at least bring the storm back in a driving sheet. The wind carried the scent of men and dogs. Hunting season had ended a month ago. And while he could track Marie without light and through the snow, those two protections from the hunters were gone.

He pulled his jacket zipper higher. The cold he normally relished left him numb to the bone this morning.

Just ahead of him Adam stopped. When Ean caught up, he saw Marie had changed course, crossing the river she'd been running parallel to.

"Her pace is slowing here and she's been stopping at regular intervals. The distance between stops is shrinking."

"Labor's accelerating." Ean squinted at the other side of the river. A distant, excited yip broke the morning quiet and a chorus of baying joined in.

Fear and adrenaline spurted through Ean. His heart was doing the equivalent of a spinout in his chest. Adam grabbed his shoulders.

"If we're going to protect her Ean, we have to be smart. Remember that. Promise me."

Ean was panting, straining to hold himself in place while his body screamed at him to shift and shred every last threat to Marie. He nodded.

"She's headed for the barn. Go up river." Adam peeled out of his jacket. "A few yards ahead, the river narrows and you can cross over the rocks. You'll find the main trail from there. You'll recognize it." He fished a cell phone from the back pocket of his jeans. "Call Maya and have her drive the truck to you. Tell her what you need her to bring for the birthing."

"Marie will not have our babies in a barn." His voice was embarrassingly shrill, a child's voice.

"Just in case." He patted Ean's arm.

"Maya can't drive," Ean argued. "It's not allowed. Driving's dangerous. I doubt she even knows where to put the key."

Adam ripped his shirt open sending buttons flying.

"Maya can drive. The snow will be a challenge for her but you'd be surprised what she can do."

He was working his way out of his boots. "We need that truck. You can talk her through. Go."

"Adam, let me deal with them. Marie needs you to shift her for the birthing."

The jeans went next.

"I know the area better. Besides, when they see you shifted, they see an ordinary tiger and they will shoot without a thought. When they see me...they aren't sure what they see, and that pause to consider

gives me the edge.”

\* \* \* \* \*

In a creaking barn she prepared, shredding straw bales, pushing straw to make a thick nest. The pain rose and receded in waves, urging her to hurry.

When she could lay her weary body down, it was with a sad sigh. All the old fantasies came back to replay like a black and white movie. The dream of being a new mom, propped up on pillows, snug in a sweetly ruffled nightie, gazing lovingly at a chubby-cheeked baby, counting tiny fingers and toes. There were throngs of nurses and doctors in her fantasy, poised to attend to the slightest hiccup.

Wind moaned around the eaves. The barn shuddered. This was not her fantasy. She groaned through the next contraction. She didn't know what she was giving birth to. Sometimes she dreamed she gave birth to human babies with cat heads. How many toes should baby tigers have?

What scared her most was love. Would she love them? Would she be able to look at her babies and feel a connection, recognize them, feel a swelling of love in her chest? Had her own mother abandoned her because she couldn't love or look at what she had given birth to?

\* \* \* \* \*

They needed time. They needed time to steer the hunters away. They needed time to get Marie shifted before the birth. They needed time to get home. Ean had a feeling all that would add up to more time than the babies would grant.

He teetered on humps of snow-slick rock, picking his way across the river. His progress was maddeningly slow, but going faster risked breaking a leg or his head. Downriver, the hounds' baying changed and took up a new direction, moving away. Adam, he thought. It was a mixed blessing. Adam could draw them off but it put him farther from his goal. If they were to be born in human form, the babies had to be shifted while their energy remained shielded and merged with their mother's. On their own, the immature nervous systems were no more capable of connecting with an adult's transitioning energy than a newly hatched chick was capable of flying.

Ean made the last leap to the riverbank, missed and hit water. He caught hold of a sapling and managed to limit his dousing to knee deep. He pulled himself up onto the bank, skidded in the snow and staggered forward. The wind turned his soggy jeans stiff in minutes.

He had to get to her. Adam had to get there. This was the one test they could not fail. The little ones would remain in the form they were born in until they reached puberty when their parents would guide them through shifting. If that form wasn't human, the damage would be irreversible. He'd been a fool to let Adam go.

He found her in the throes of a particularly intense contraction. She snarled and thrashed in agony. He could cross "early stage of labor" off his hope list. Ean waited for the contraction to pass, squatting in the semi-dark and wishing it didn't sound like those hounds were headed in his direction again.

"Easy sweetheart," he said, dropping to his knees to crawl the last couple of feet. She hissed but didn't raise her head. Her sides heaved like she'd just run a mile but the respirations were slowing. Her breath was his guide. He kept a respectful watch on the uppermost front paw. "I know you don't want company, but you need it."

She moaned and the keening of it made him feel like a slug. Her paw lifted, curled, poised to bat him away.

He flipped open the cell and speed-dialed Maya.

“How we doing kiddo?”

“I’m on the way. How’s Marie?”

“She won’t let me close enough to touch her.”

“I found all the supplies you wanted. And I think every towel and blanket Adam owns is in this truck.”

Ean kept an eye on Marie. Her panting had slowed. Her eyes closed. The strike paw had uncurled. He didn’t want to need what Maya brought.

“Okay, Maya, drive careful. The truck can get away from you faster than you’d think in the snow.”

“I’m fine, Ean.”

“We still have some time. Stay safe.”

He flipped the phone shut and crawled closer, talking aloud to ease his mind and soothe Marie. “She’s never driven before and it’s snowing. Makes me nervous.”

Marie made a huffing sound but didn’t lift her head. Ean scooted close enough to run one finger around the edge of her ear. The fur was damp.

“Look sweetheart, I don’t want to worry you, but leaving you out of the loop hasn’t worked well.” Marie grunted and flicked her ear but didn’t stop him when he moved closer. He stroked her side.

“You can’t have the babies until Adam gets here, not if you want them born human.”

She raised her head. How much did she understand? He scooted closer and sat cross-legged beside her head.

“There are only a couple of Pantherians in the world with the power to shift an adult, let alone an adult with six babies. I’m not one of them.”

She dropped her head into his lap with a heart-tugging sigh.

“Look on the bright side, pretty soon you’ll be able to tell me exactly what you think of me and the muddle I’ve made of all this.”

She started purring. Ean wasn’t sure that was a good sign. He moved his hand lower and her uterus contracted under his palm. Marie lifted her head slightly, her ears aimed in the direction of the road. Ean heard it too, the rumble of the truck engine straining through the snow. The snow had stopped by the time he’d reached the barn. It made things easier as far as transporting Marie but it meant the hunters would linger rather than go home. He could hear the hounds too. They were close, but not getting closer and he assumed that meant Adam had created a diversion.



Marie panted and thrashed. He rubbed his cheek against hers, and stretched out beside her, stroking his hand gently along her side. "Easy mommy," he murmured, "easy now." He hummed his lullaby for her. It seemed to help. She hissed through her teeth at the worst of it and he nuzzled her. "Sh...it'll get better in a minute...sh."

Maya was tugging at the door by the time Marie's head drooped against Ean's chest. "That's the way sweetheart," Ean told her, "rest while you can."

The barn door screeched open. Straw swirled with a gust of wind. Ean went to help Maya.

"How long?" Maya asked, sliding open the side door of the van.

"Not long enough," Ean said. "It's going to have to happen here."

"Adam?"

Ean jerked his head toward the woods. He's still out there somewhere. Ean was happy to see she had bundled things in garbage bags. "Let's keep it all wrapped up. Pull out a couple of blankets and my medical kit for now. I hate having to deliver in this dirty barn."

Maya grabbed Ean's arm. "What happens if Adam doesn't get here, if she doesn't get shifted? Will it be so bad?"

"Language skills and the cognitive processes that rise from that development are formed in the first five years. The children would be well past that window of opportunity before they could be shifted." Ean thrust a bag into Maya's arms. "Their cognitive development would be permanently damaged." He grabbed some blankets and his bag. "Normally a female could shift herself at the first signs of labor. Marie can't."

While Ean sorted supplies, Maya soothed Marie.

"Deep breaths, ocean breaths, like in yoga," Maya coaxed in a chirpy voice that grated at Ean. But it was working for Marie and he was grateful for that.

The hounds were getting closer and Ean found himself breathing along with Maya's exaggerated ocean breaths, hoping his fear wouldn't show. He held his mind open for a whisper from Adam. The silence remained. He was either too far off or too busy. From the sound of things distance wasn't the problem.

For the first time in his life Ean wished for a gun, for the power to kill something. The knowledge that he wouldn't hesitate was like an ice-cold finger down his spine. If they got too close he would shift and go after them himself.

"Ean," Maya called. Ean went to them, but Marie was thrashing mindlessly through a contraction and he couldn't do anything but stay clear of her paws. To make matters worse the din of baying came on rapidly and broke into hysteria a few yards from the barn.

"Adam?"

No answer.

Marie lifted her head as the contraction eased. Her ears were aimed toward the commotion outside.

Ean's heart raced and his breath came in pants. He'd tossed his jacket aside in preparation for the birthing. Even in the frosty barn, sweat streamed down his back, trickled from his armpits.

Maya wrapped her arms around Marie's neck and gave Ean a warning look that had him doing the same.

Marie tried to scramble to her feet. Ean didn't know what the hounds of hell were supposed to sound like but he was pretty sure they were savaging Adam just beyond the barn. Marie seemed to think so too.

The hounds squealed and bayed and yipped and barked in an hysterical frenzy.

He and Maya clung to Marie with the tenacity of bull riders. Ean even lifted a knee over her back, trying to keep her down. She could shake them off like straw from her fur if she put her mind to it. She was close to succeeding.

Just as he pressed his full weight to her heaving body the blast came.

Adam's roar boomed. A tiger's roar can paralyze its prey. That roar, on the heels of the gun blast, paralyzed Ean's heart.

A man screamed in a long, keening, crawl-over-your-skin kind of agony. His next scream had a nauseating gurgle to it and broke off to dead silence at its eardrum piercing peak.

Ean shuddered.

Another man squawked hysterically, the voice receding like a yapping hyena. Hounds yelped and yipped, scattering in all directions.

Then silence.

The only sounds now were Marie's labored panting and Ean's own ragged breath.

He looked at Maya. "Breathe," he said.

When she did a sob came with it.

They all waited for a sign. None came.

*Adam!* Ean screamed in his mind.

No answer.

"Adam," he screamed aloud, his bellow loud enough to carry to the next town.

No answer.

Chapter Eleven

The bullet hit like a wrecking ball, slamming Adam into a great oak. Time unreeled in slow motion. He would have said it took at least an afternoon to fly three feet, connect with the granite trunk and slide down, down, down.

There was screaming—men, dogs, Marie, Ean. Their voices thrummed at his eardrums, or in his head. Meaning didn't penetrate.

He should feel pain, he thought. This should really hurt. But he was oddly detached, floating, floating above himself.

Blood stained snow around him. Judging by the size of the stain, he hadn't been on the ground long. Red seeped over white at a pace that promised it wouldn't matter much longer.

He could see the dark shape, a man lying at the edge of the river, the top half of his body bobbed face down with the current.

He needed to move. There was something he had to do. All he wanted to do was float, float higher and higher above the trees, above the clouds. He tried to make sense of the sensations that he was above his body but still part of it.

He needed to shift, recharge, but he couldn't accomplish that from this split state. The greater the distance between his mind and body, the fainter the pain, but he couldn't escape completely. A weight held him like a tether. He tugged on that invisible leash but his body wouldn't let him leave. There was something yet... Something he had to do.

What could he do with that wreckage? He felt sorry for that bloody fur rag draped over the tree roots. Not sorry enough to return to it.

He tugged harder, fighting away from life rather than toward it. *It's done*, he thought. *I want to go.*

She wouldn't let him. The thought moved into his consciousness. Marie wouldn't let him give up. She was the weight.

*I've got you*, she said. *Can you feel me here with you?*

He looked around. *Marie?*

*Come to me*, her voice whispered inside his brain.

The tether tugged back at him, pulled him in like reeling in a fish. He struggled against it. Blood seeped from that crumpled fur rug, the breath, a faint wisp visible in the frigid air. He didn't want to be that wreckage.

*Can't*, he told her. It drained him, trying to push thoughts back through that fading brain. *So sorry. So sorry, love. Can't.*

He felt the pull downward and he lost more altitude like a balloon deflating.

*I need you. Your babies need you.*

The babies. His glow came back and he floated higher. *You and Ean, you'll be fine. It'll be how you need it to be. Babies need a happy mother.*

He floated higher.

*No!* Her will hit him harder than the bullet and slammed him back into his body.

Pain exploded grenade-like through his nerves. Her words arrowed into his consciousness.

*You will not leave me! Ever! Not ever!*

*Love, there is not enough of me left to be of any use. Please...*

He could not penetrate her hardheaded determination.

*Later, she told him, later I will show you just how much of you is left to use.*

She won. He was literally half-dead and she could make him want her, want to do whatever it took to please her. He was shivering hard, what energy remained being lost to tremors that couldn't warm him enough to save him.

*No strength, love. Can't move.*

The air buzzed, grew warm, light wrapped around him like a blanket. The death light, he thought.

*Nothing so angelic as that, she said. Only me.*

She was there, a beautiful white tiger standing over him.

*Marie? How? Surely it was a death vision, a wish.*

*This is just a little rabbit trick I've been working on.*

Her paws buckled under her. Her front ones folded bringing her to her knees, the back ones crouched. She was fighting to stay in control as her babies fought to be born.

*You have to help me, Adam.* She leaned against him, draping her body over his. His blood seeped onto her fur.

*Will try...will try.*

He felt a hum, faint, like a bee at first but rising quickly to the level of a high-powered generator, spreading from her body to his. It was like purring but different. Instinctively he matched it, vibrating in harmony with her. It was warm, loving, glorious. The humming pushed back the pain and then, swoosh, he floated in dark more complete than any he'd known.

\* \* \* \* \*

One minute Ean had Marie snarling and twisting in his arms and the next he was staring at empty air into Maya's shocked face.

“What did you do?” Maya screamed. “Get her back.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Adam then?”

“Adam can’t do that. I don’t know if the magus could do that.”

Ean sat on the cold ground, staring, unable to wrap his brain around the reality of the empty space where Marie had been.

“Sweet mother,” Maya swore. She pushed to her feet, scrubbed her hands on the sides of her jeans, then pushed away hair that had fallen in wild tangles in front of her eyes. “What should we do?”

She was looking around as if Marie might turn up behind a straw bale or in a corner.

Ean stood, still dazed. “I guess we should give it a minute, see if she pops back in.”

“Do you think she tried to shift on her own?”

He didn’t know if that were possible. She’d shifted in sex, something he wasn’t going to discuss with Maya, but she’d never found her way back from the shifting plane on her own. He put his hand into the space where she’d been. Like water shifting between solid or liquid or gas, shifting required a massive amount of energy, left a noticeable cold spot in the vicinity of the transitioning shifter.

The area where Marie had been didn’t feel any colder.

“What are you doing?”

“I think she shifted and she’s stuck.”

He was still pondering how he might guide her back when Marie popped back in—naked, shivering, human. Her belly was a mountain and her hair a jungle over her face. Ean reached out, hardly believing his hand connected with real human flesh. She was so hot it burned. She curled onto her side, wrapped her arms round her belly and screamed.

The scream set Ean in motion before his brain had time to process what was happening. The first baby was crowning. Ean cupped his hand to support the small wet head.

“Help her sit, Maya. Get behind her and let her lean back against you.” He guided Marie’s hands to hold her knees wide. Marie leaned in, pushed and sobbed. Their firstborn slipped out of her mother and into her father’s hands.

Her arms waved, her knees drew up to her tummy. She turned her head and drew her first breath. Ean set her carefully on a waiting towel, handling her like she was spun glass and the slightest puff of wind might carry her away. She looked into his eyes, staring, captivating. He dealt with her cord, dried her as best he could and wrapped her against the cold. It was all he had time for.

“She’s beautiful,” he told Marie, “looks like her mother.” Marie stared at him, wild-eyed, uncomprehending. It was the first sign something was wrong, or maybe the second. He put his hand on

her knee and cringed at the heat. The explosive fever worried him.

It was after the third baby was delivered that she started to vomit between pushing. By then Maya could also tell something was going terribly wrong. She exchanged a look with Ean and he shook his head. He didn't want to say anything that might panic Marie.

At the back of his mind, the dread for Adam nagged. He needed to find him, find out what happened. Was he still alive, injured, bleeding to death a few feet away? Ean didn't dare leave Marie long enough to find out.

They soldiered on as Adam would have. Marie writhed, burned, retched, delivered. Babies whimpered and squirmed in the blanket nest he tucked them in. Marie's pulse was so fast Ean wondered that her heart didn't come apart with the strain. Her respirations came quick and shallow. He thought they might lose her before that sixth child slipped into his hands. He tucked the last baby in and grabbed for his jacket. He was a cold bloody mess. Now, while Maya was doing her best to clean and calm Marie, he wanted to take a quick look for Adam.

The babies squirmed and fussed like kittens in a pile. The blanket Ean had draped over them rose and fell with their wriggling. He needed to get them home, get Marie home, but he wasn't going home without Adam.

He looked at Maya. She nodded and Ean left them.

Snow started to fall again, sleet and snow. Ice pellets pecked at his face and eyelids. Ean cursed. They weren't getting any breaks today. He took the path toward the river. He found the lifeless body of a hunter, lying half in the water at the river's edge. He saw no sign of Adam. Blowing snow covered most footprints but the drifts weren't deep enough to hide a man's body, let alone a tiger's.

"Adam," Ean shouted.

"Adam," he screamed again.

He tried calling mentally. Nothing. Only the wind's ghoulisn moan.

"Adam!" he bellowed, emotion breaking his voice. "Please, Adam," he whispered. He couldn't stay. He couldn't hunt for him. He had to look after Marie and the babies. If Adam was alive out there somewhere, Ean doubted he would be for long.

Ean had to put the new lives first. Adam would. Ean heard screaming then, Maya's voice, faint, shouting his name. He ran for the barn.

Maya held a slippery newborn in her hands, sobbing and trying not to drop her. Ean slammed the barn door shut and dove to her side.

"Tell me what to do Ean," she sobbed. "Sweet Mother, she's so tiny." Maya was on her knees. Marie was curled up on her side, too spent to do more than breathe. Ean got another towel, dealt with the cord and the trailing placenta.

"There were supposed to be six," he told Maya. His hands were shaking. "Just six."

"You want me to put her back?"

He looked up. She was brushing tears with the backs of her hands. Yet, she teased him, her way of helping him hold it together. He hugged her. He was so grateful she was with him. He put the baby in her arms and got a blanket to wrap around Marie. She struggled, holding her was like hanging on to a hot coal but he was not taking her naked into that storm.

He checked the infants. Their respirations and pulses were strong but they were quieter, not as active. He needed to get them to warmth.

“Start the truck Maya. Turn that heater up full blast.”

He pressed fingers to Marie’s wrist, felt the rapid beat under her burning skin. He had no means to check her blood pressure. Marie was pushing at him.

“Sick...sick,” she panted. He would have been relieved, those were the first words she said. But he understood what she needed and helped her turn again to her side, so she could retch in the mud and straw. He wiped at sweat on his brow with the back of his hand. He didn’t dare risk taking them to a hospital. Some human medicines could kill while others might bring on a spontaneous shift.

If they survived the medical care, they wouldn’t survive the research. There were no laws to protect animals from whatever the doctors would do. Marie might be half-human, but half-human equaled not human in the eyes of the law.

“Ean?” Maya was back. “Tell me this isn’t as bad as it looks.”

“It may be the shift. It could have aggravated her motion sickness.” He knew better. This was serious.

“What about Adam?”

“I couldn’t find him.”

Marie groaned and rolled to her back. “My head is going to explode,” she whimpered.

Maya had tied Marie’s hair back with a strip of gauze. Ean stroked the back of his hand over her cheek, wincing at the heat. “I’m right here, sweetie. I’ll make it better soon. Can you tell me, do you know where Adam is? Did he help you?”

She was turning her head back and forth. “My head. My head. Sick.”

“If he’s not there,” Maya asked, “what was all that screaming?” She gathered two babies in a blanket, covering their faces and tucking them close to her body.

“There is a dead guy down by the river,” Ean told her. “His head was under the water. I didn’t waste time checking on him. But it wasn’t Adam. There wasn’t any sign of Adam. The snow has blown over any tracks.”

“Adam can’t leave me,” Marie gasped. “He’s not ever—” She pushed back up onto her elbows. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she flopped back in the straw, convulsing.

Maya clutched the babies, her eyes round, her voice panicked. “Ean, what’s happening? Is she dying?”

He didn't have time to answer. He rolled Marie to her side. "Get those babies in the truck, Maya. Hurry." He leaned close to Marie's ear, talking softly. "Stay with me now, sweetheart. I've got you." Tears ran down his face. The seizure confirmed his suspicion. Eclampsia.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We need help, Ean," Maya lectured in a hushed voice. "This is more than we can fix."

"There is no help close enough."

"Is Marie dying?"

Ean didn't answer. He wrung out a cloth in a basin of ice water and continued to bathe Marie. Her flushed skin was a rosy contrast to the white sheets, beautiful and deadly. He had to get the fever down. He washed her face, smoothing back her hair, stroking over her eyelids, wiping the corners of her eyes. He rinsed the rag again and wiped her lips. They were dry, cracked. She was terribly dehydrated. He slipped a few ice chips past her lips but he didn't dare give her much.

"Ean?"

He wished Maya would go back to the babies. He knew she wouldn't until he gave her answers.

"I injected her with magnesium sulfate and calcium. We have to give it time." He wrung the cloth again and ran it over her chest, around and under her breasts. His beautiful love. What had they done?

"I bathed and dressed all the babies. They are tucked into their beds, sleeping for now. Your daughters are beautiful." She had the smallest in a sling tied across her chest and snuggled under her shirt. That one needed watching and extra warmth.

In the bloody drama of the barn it hadn't registered with him that they had seven daughters. All this and he could still wind up alone. The wasting sickness stalked. A slow death waited for most of them, possibly all. He felt as if he was living under water, at the bottom of the ocean where light couldn't reach.

Marie sighed when the icy rag caressed her belly. He could feel the heat in her, rippling like waves from hot pavement. Her eyes fluttered. She looked at a spot just to the right of Ean.

"Adam?"

"It's okay." Ean bathed her face again, closing her lids over that glassy-eyed stare. "Shh."

"He can't leave me," she said. Her hand gripped his wrist. "Not ever."

He tipped his head back, blinking hard. If he could have thought of a response, he couldn't have said it. His throat felt like it was swelling shut.

Maya wouldn't let up. "Ean, we have to have help."

He rose and turned Maya toward the hall, followed her out, stopping just outside the door. He leaned against the wall, so tired he could sleep standing up. He didn't dare close his eyes for the second it might take Marie to slip away forever.



“Will she die?” Maya whispered.

“She has eclampsia. It can be fatal. I’m doing what I can.”

“It doesn’t look like she’s getting better.”

Ean lifted a hand, tried to formulate some argument to convince her. His hand dropped. Defeated. He looked hard toward the nursery and tried to believe some sort of miracle could yank them back from the cliff they were staggering toward.

“I’m going to get the magus, Ean.”

“How? Will you call him on the phone?” Very few Pantherians had access to the magus. It would be like trying to drop in on the president. Of necessity, a man with that much power required distance and protection from the endless string of needs and demands the entire species could make on him. Adam could have gotten through. Not Maya.

Maya turned away, hugging herself tight.

Ean heard Maya’s soft snuffling. She didn’t want him to know she was crying. He reached out and pulled her close, careful of the baby. She had to be as tired as he was. In the few hours since they’d gotten home, neither of them had a chance to so much as sit down or do more than grab a swallow of water here and there.

“I think I can get to the magus through the mirror,” she said. “I could find the way.”

She was trembling, terrified of the offer she made.

“No.”

“Ean, we can’t stand back and watch them die.” She slipped her hand inside her shirt. A tiny hand poked through the opening. Ean pressed his fingertip into a palm barely bigger than a buttercup.

“She’s so tiny. I don’t think this little one will make it, Ean.”

“It won’t help to lose you.”

“And there’s Adam,” she said. “Someone has to look for him.”

Ean didn’t see how Adam could be alive at this point. He refused to say so.

“I’m not asking you.” Maya pulled away from him. “I’m just letting you know. You’ll have to keep an eye on all of them by yourself for a while.”

She meant it. There was no question of stopping her, save locking her in a closet. He had no fight left.

She kissed his cheek and unbuttoned her shirt. His daughter fit in one of his hands. He cupped her to his chest. Her knees and arms were pulled in close to her tummy. He couldn’t resist the urge to give one tiny toe a lick. He’d seen raisins bigger than that toe. Maya helped him strap the sling across his chest then she brought a flannel shirt from the laundry room to button around them.

“Don’t worry big brother,” she said. “I’ll be back. Someone has to make sure all your daughters know how to keep you in line.”

He hugged her and planted a kiss on her forehead. “Be safe.”

He checked the babies again after Maya went downstairs. He was grateful they needed his attention and he didn’t have to watch that mirror swallow her.

He checked Marie next. She moaned when he turned her to bathe her back.

“Ean, please,” she whispered, “cut my head off.”

He smiled through tears. “I’ll put Maya to work sharpening my chainsaw.”

She closed her eyes, swallowed, her breath labored.

“Marie, honey,” he asked, wringing the rag and sliding it over her burning skin again. “How did you shift? Did Adam help you?”

She opened her mouth, her eyelids fluttered, a rapid beat, like wings. Whatever she was going to say came out as a gurgle. Another seizure wracked her. He was helpless.

It was twenty minutes after the seizure passed before Ean allowed himself the luxury of sitting in a chair near the bed.

He didn’t want to close his eyes. Every time he did this nightmare of a day painted its grisliest scenes on the insides of his eyelids. Marie’s birth ravaged body, the dead man by the river and Adam, bleeding and freezing to death in the snow, waiting for help that wouldn’t come.

The insistent wails of newborns still rang in his ears. Everyone depended on him. He had never felt so inadequate.

Their best hope rested with Maya, the most sheltered and least trained of them all. She hadn’t let that stop her. If there had ever been a girl-child the tribe might willingly have relinquished to the wasting disease, Maya would be her. And fate had placed the tribe’s brightest hope for survival into the hands of the woman they had driven away.

## Chapter Twelve

The icy teeth of a winter storm, the iron crush of death descending, had given way to womblike warmth that cradled and caressed him with a lover’s soft hands. Being inside her. That’s what Adam thought of. It felt as if he’d buried himself in the fragrant heaven of his lover’s body. Tight, squeezing, silky warmth. He waited for the rise in tension, that climbing to release.

After hours of waiting, heaven turned to prison. Lost in space. That’s what he thought now. A dark, tight space. Those loving hands had turned to manacles. No stars glittered here. It was pure black. Black crawled through his brain. He floated on a black sea. It floated on him, maybe through him. It seemed to breathe when he did. He could feel the rise and fall of his own lungs and the swell of this endless sea within them.

What? What was this?

How could he escape?

Should he?

His eyes...were they open? Was he blind? Panic took hold, sizzling along his nerves. He felt rapid fluttering where his eyelids should be. The sea swelled, churning around him, under him, through him, boiling.

He gave up the effort to open his eyes and the churning subsided. He tried to think. How long had he floated in this nothingness? Was this death? Was it hell?

Nothing to touch. Nothing to see. Nothing to smell. A silence so loud it hurt his ears. The sheer sensory deprivation forced his senses into overdrive, wrapped him again in the sensual garden that was his lover. His mind creating the stimulation he needed. The delicate tendrils of her hair trailing along his body, that sweet feminine perfume from between her parted thighs. Soft, throaty moans rose and fell like music when his tongue licked her honey-soaked slit. Her response never failed to make his cock rise. She made him hot. So hot.

He moaned, a silent moan. The black sea swallowed everything. Everything but his memory of her.

He remembered the moist heat of her breath running across his balls when she sighed. He imagined her hot wet tongue, the way it stroked up his cock, and down again, the pull of her lips sliding over his shaft. She would cup her small hands around the base of his cock while her throat seemed to swallow and squeeze him. Milk him.

She kissed. She licked. She sucked.

While he licked. While he kissed. While he sucked at the swollen bud of her clit until she cried out, singing his name to the night. Or to the morning. Or to the afternoon. His mind remembered but his body didn't feel.

He must be dead.

This had to be hell.

The panic closed in again. His eyelids flapped their useless wings against the darkness and seismic tremors rattled the black sea enveloping him. It was like being shaken about in an ink-filled snow globe. Without the snow.

When the shaking stopped, he heard crickets, soft chirps in the darkness that grew and grew until he thought he would lose his mind and the tremors took hold again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ean followed the magus's orders without protest. He didn't believe any of this nonsense would save Marie but so far he hadn't been asked to do anything that would hurt. The lights were off, a lone candle glowed on the dresser. Music played, the sound of water and crickets chirping, a summer night melody. Melted wax, laced with vanilla and spices perfumed the air. The magus had a calming effect, on the

babies, on Marie, on Ean.

Anything that calmed should at least lower her blood pressure a few points. It had remained stubbornly at 190/100 since he'd brought her home.

If the magus wanted to shake bone rattles over her body and sprinkle her with eye-of-newt to get her pressure down, Ean would have let him.

He was giving her an ordinary enough medical examination, checking her pulse, the dilation of her pupils. He bathed her face and fed her some ice chips as Ean had. Except for briefly touching his forehead to hers while he held her face between his hands and humming what sounded like a lullaby, he'd done nothing magus-like.

"I don't understand," Ean told the magus. "Her blood pressure is still through the roof. The seizures keep coming. She's not responding to the magnesium sulfate. I don't know how many more of these seizures she can go through."

The magus removed the pillows Ean used to keep Marie on her side. If nausea hit again, she might choke. Thankfully, that stage of the eclampsia passed soon after the last baby was born.

Ean had to busy his hands with the baby to keep from snatching the pillows away and putting them back where he had them. He looked at the pillows tossed to the other side of the bed and touched his daughter's petal soft cheek, felt the tug of her tiny mouth find his fingertip and pull. She should be pulling, but at her mother's nipple. His callused finger was a sorry replacement.

The baby was curled in her warm sling, eyes two bright blue stars, a tiny pink tongue that kept poking out. He'd just washed his hands so he let her have his finger again. She latched on and sucked, closing her eyes with pleasure. She made throaty infant noises. He wondered how he could avoid losing his heart to a life so fragile and fleeting. He suspected it was too late to be asking that question.

Ean itched to go search for Adam. He imagined Adam's father did too. He wondered where he found the discipline to keep from flying apart as one obstacle after another delayed their search. Maybe it was just unshakeable self-control developed over centuries of practice. The living came first.

"Ean," he asked. "Is there any warning a seizure is setting in?"

The magus was a medical doctor—among other things. You could pile up many degrees over the centuries. Ean tried to hold onto that thought. He might know a trick, some offbeat remedy.

"It usually starts with twitching. Her eyelids will flutter. Then her eyes roll back and tremors take over."

Maya hovered in the doorway. "Can you help her, Magus?"

Ean eased out of the baby sling, cupped her in his hands. Her arms spread wide like bird wings. Maya had a blanket over her shoulder. She gathered it around Marisa when Ean put her in Maya's arms. He'd named the babies while he waited for Maya to bring help. He thought it gave them permanence. Mostly, he needed some piece of each he could hold tight to, something no one could take.

"We'll see what we can do," the magus was saying. "We'll see."

He leaned over Marie, suddenly intent. "Is this what you mean, Ean? This flutter?"

He grasped Marie's head, pressing his thumbs into the bony ridges of her brows. Ean grabbed the doorframe with both hands to keep from snatching the magus away from her. He could not endure much more of this.

Another seizure ripped through her and brought Ean to his knees beside the bed. When she stopped shuddering, he squeezed her hand. "I will go crazy if you do that again," he wept. "I swear I will go insane."

The magus put his hand on Ean's shoulder. "You've done all the right things for eclampsia Ean. There's nothing you neglected."

"Then why doesn't it help?" He pushed up from the floor. Turned away. He didn't want to watch her die. He couldn't leave her to go through it alone.

"Because, eclampsia isn't doing this."

That spun Ean around. "What then?" A faint rush of hope swelled in his chest.

"Adam."

That answer flattened it. Perhaps the magus had beat him to insanity.

"What? You're trying to tell me some kind of soul crisis causes this?" He wanted to grab the magus by the shoulders, shake him hard. He might have if Maya hadn't stepped between them.

Ean shoved his hands in his pants pockets but he was sure his glare made his opinion of this silliness clear. The magus didn't flinch.

"From what you told me, I think she tried to go to Adam since he couldn't get to her. And while I can't explain how they managed it, somehow Adam wound up inside her when she shifted."

"Are you crazy?" The words exploded from Ean's mouth.

"He is inside of her. They are entangled. She has his eyes."

"That's impossible! He was outside by the river, Magus. She was in the barn."

Maya was leaning over Marie. "Ean," she said.

"They were nowhere near each other. No way for them to entangle. Whoever heard of such a thing anyway?"

"Nevertheless, he is trapped inside her."

"Ean," Maya said. "I think you should shut up and see for yourself."

Ean didn't believe it. Not for a minute. The magus was a ridiculous old man with ludicrous explanations. He knelt again at Marie's side, exerted pressure on the upper ridge of her eye sockets with his thumbs. Her lids popped up and he saw it too, her iris shifted from blue to silver then back. She was slipping away from them, only minimally responsive.

“Adam,” she whispered. “Adam can’t leave me.”

She’d been saying that, over and over. Ean had thought she meant she didn’t want Adam to leave. Had she been telling him the source of her problem all along?

Ean shivered and sat back on his heels. “What do we do?What?”

“I don’t know.”

Ean hadn’t expected that answer. If the magus, supreme millennial being, wisest of all didn’t know, who did?

“There are mysteries even ridiculous old men haven’t unraveled,” the magus said.

It was a reprimand. One he deserved. He should have been guarding his thoughts better. Ean stood, head bowed respectfully. “I’ll do anything you need, Magus. Anything!”

The magus frowned and waved his hands. “Let me think a minute.”

He walked away from them and stood looking out through the balcony doors. Night had settled. The windows were black squares in white wood frames. Ean knew Adam used black glass as a thinking tool, to solve complex problems. It didn’t require anything so fancy as the mirror he had in his lab. A dark windowpane would serve. Adam said it gave the imagination a canvas to paint ideas upon and served as an elevator of sorts to take the mind to higher states, states that could bend time and space to their will. Ean half expected to see the magus vanish before their eyes and reappear with Adam and Marie, properly separated in their own bodies. Another part of him knew that just because the process defied rules he knew, that didn’t mean there weren’t rules.

You couldn’t punch random buttons on a calculator and come up with the total for a row of numbers. What the magus did was akin to punching those buttons mentally while they shifted positions on the other side of a dark curtain. Wishing and fairy dust didn’t provide solutions. Applying the right mental formula could.

The magus turned and pointed at Maya. “She is the key.”

Maya edged toward Ean. “Me?” she squeaked.

“No. The baby. Bring her here.”

Maya’s arms tightened. The baby squirmed.

“He won’t hurt her, Maya,” Ean said.

She relinquished the baby. Reluctantly. “She’s so fragile, Magus.”

He unwrapped her and she fretted, her arms and legs batting the air. He put her on the bed, lifting the sheet and tucking her close to her mother’s breast, skin to skin. One little arm waved, her tiny fist batting her own nose. Ean knelt beside the magus, ready to snatch Marisa away should Marie start to seize. The baby’s pupils were huge, dark orbs rimmed in sapphire. The fine hairs on her head were so blonde they were near invisible. She seemed focused on her mother’s face.

The movement made Marie open her eyes. She looked clearer, more alert. She panted, her respiration still too fast, as if she was breathing for two.

“Say hello to your daughter,” the magus said. He brought Marie’s hand to the baby’s cheek, cupped it there. Marie looked down. Their eyes connected.

Ean saw light, the first thing to pierce Marie’s pain, the first time she’d shown any interest in the babies she worked so hard to give life.

Marisa went still under her mother’s gaze. Marie stroked the infant’s fist with one finger, the tiny hand opened. They pressed palms together, the look of love so intense it made Ean squint. Marie smiled. They vanished.

Ean closed his eyes and opened them again. As if he might erase what had happened. Both gone.

Ean’s head snapped up. “What have you done?” he shouted.

The magus looked shocked. He held out both hands, palms up, staring at them. “I didn’t do anything. It wasn’t me.”

“Then who?”

“I don’t know.”

Ean got to his feet, hands on hips and glared. “That answer is unacceptable, Magus.” He didn’t believe the magus didn’t know. He believed the magus didn’t want to say. “You have lived a thousand years. How could anything surprise you?”

“Ean, maybe if you’d let him think.” Maya tugged at his shirt.

Ean stared at the bed. Just a rumple of sheets. He waited for his mate and child to reappear. He counted to ten. Then to twenty. He lost patience.

He was going to shake some sense into the magus if he had to, but he was going to find out what happened.

The magus held up a finger. “I’ll be right back.” Then he blinked out too.

“I cannot believe this,” Ean shouted. “It defies the laws of probability that this many things can go wrong in one birthing.”

“Or one day,” Maya added.

Ean sat on the edge of the bed, hands dangling between his knees. He had no idea how to begin, or end, or do whatever was required to mend the situation. Babies could not withstand shifting. He closed his eyes. What had he been thinking to hand her over to the magus like that, without a question?

Maya sat beside him and put her arms around him. Her cheek rested on his shoulder. “We can hold on to the hope that now that we have surpassed the quota of things that can go wrong, something has to go right.”

An insistent newborn wail started up in the nursery. Another took up the cry. There wasn't time to hope.

## Chapter Thirteen

Adam was belly-deep in snow. He dropped and rolled in it, feeling light, happier than he could remember being. It sparked, like each flake carried an inner flame, which was ridiculous. And it sang. The woods rang with the music of falling flakes that chimed when they bumped together.

This was a delicious opposite to the world he'd been locked in.

Marie raced past and he tackled her, his magnificent white tigress. She licked his face, as if she couldn't get enough of him. His heart lifted. He'd been afraid she'd find his mutant colors repulsive. He'd endured a lot of teasing from other tigers over his black fur and silver stripes when he first learned to shift. She was not acting repulsed.

He rolled away from her and raced along the river. She chased after. Definitely not repulsed. He whirled and stood his ground. She skidded to a stop, snow spraying around her. She blinked those beautiful blue eyes at him. He blinked back. Her tail rose, twitching seductively. His rose. His twitched. She crept closer. They rubbed noses.

A throat cleared. Adam knew who it was without looking. Impossible!

Marie dropped to her belly, refusing to look in his father's direction. Her tail dropped to swish along the ground. Clearly, she wasn't happy with the interruption.

"Adam," his father said.

Adam looked down at his lovely tigress. He realized they'd landed in the next realm and that Marie didn't belong here. The magus had come to call her back.

Adam moved toward the forest away from his father's call. The trees swayed and danced, a silver light glowed in their centers and ran upward like fiery sap. Crystal he thought, a crystal forest. He moved toward it, feeling a sense of peace grow as he closed in. He knew this place, had a vague memory of it that felt eons old. A sense of coming home left him dizzy.

There, on the other side of the forest, another world waited. Memories of that world didn't travel from one life to the next. His mind didn't remember but some part of him craved that place. Joy filled him, filled his soul the way air filled a collapsed balloon.

Marie trotted after him. He turned, blocking the way with his body, nudging her back when she tried to go around. When she wouldn't back down, he bumped her chest with his head, warning her back with a stern huff.

"Adam."

He whirled. Irritated. He was doing everything he could to turn her back. His father might lend a hand.

His father waited on the other side of the river. His reflection wavering over ripples and eddies. The river



song on this plane was a deep booming bass that seemed to bubble up from the earth realm. A blue-eyed cub, whiter than the snow, batted at her reflection in the black waters. She didn't belong here either. The sight of her near the water set anxious sparks snapping in the air around him.

"Take them back," he told his father. "It's not their time."

"Is it yours?"

"I only know I can't go back." Returning to that deflated, pain-racked state had zero appeal.

"I see." His father went down on one knee to pat the cub's head. She put her paw on his knee and looked up into his face. He covered her paw with his hand. Understanding, a silent conversation Adam couldn't penetrate, passed between them. His father got to his feet and stepped back. Pain glittered, clear and bright, in his eyes.

He hadn't expected that, grief from a man always so firmly in control. Adam tried to explain. "I'm soul weary. I can't take any more."

"I know, son." His voice carried a weariness that only those centuries old can express. "I know." He turned and walked away.

The cub pawed the snow where he'd been, but didn't follow.

"I'm not coming back," Adam roared. "It's no use threatening me with them."

He felt light here, joyous, more comfortable in his skin than he had ever been. He wouldn't give that up. He wouldn't trade it for a world bereft of hope, oozing misery.

His father paused. "I'm not threatening you, Adam. I respect your decision."

He nodded toward Marie. "She came here on her own. They both did."

He started walking again. "Wait," Adam cried. "Wait."

Adam raced back to Marie. He roared. He bumped her. He bullied. She crouched in the snow, tail curled round over her nose, face hidden in her paws.

He raced back, growled at the baby, trying to scare her back from the water. She sat her dainty bottom in the snow, swatted the air with her paw and tried to imitate him. Her growl sounding more like the quick tick of a clock.

He looked at his father. "Please. Please, take them back."

"To a world that, as you believe, oozes misery? Why?"

"I don't know."

"Yes you do."

He looked back at Marie. She waited for him, front paws crossed one over the other, her tail swaying.

“They will change that world,” Adam said at last. “They will change us. They are a change for the better.”

“Their destinies are tied to yours. They won’t leave if you don’t.” His father turned again, raised his arm and departed, swallowed by a black hole in the deep purple sky.

He could stay. The three of them could stay, come back to new lives sometime in the future after he’d rested and was ready to tackle that world again. But it would be too late for the Pantherian tribes. It would be too late for innocents like Lilly.

“It won’t be easy,” he told them. “We’ll suffer ten times over for every bit of good we accomplish.”

They blinked blue eyes at him, calmly waiting, willing to let him choose. He looked at his beautiful love and knew there was never really any choice but to stand by her side while she fulfilled her destiny.

\* \* \* \* \*

A fly whizzed past his face. A fly in winter? Adam wasn’t ready to wake up. He tried blowing at it. It whizzed past again. He opened his eyes just as his daughter’s fist connected with his nose. The weight of life settled into his bones. His leg felt like someone had left an iron sizzling on top of it. Only concern that he might frighten the infant kept him from howling in agony. A rock concert blared inside his brain. The effort to lift his hand and capture the errant fist left him exhausted. With the fist contained, the rest of her body wriggled and thrashed. It made him weary to watch.

“Hey,” Marie looked at him across their daughter. “It’s about time you woke up.”

“I was having a hot dream,” he croaked. His throat felt like he’d swallowed a leaf pile.

“Oh?” She reached over and tweaked his nipple. Pain blazed through his leg. He was ready to hack it off with an axe. Despite that, he’d endure ten times this agony to have her smiling at him, touching him.

She pursed her lips, then licked them seductively. “Guess I’ll have to see what I can do to make you forget that dream-girl.”

He would let her do anything she wanted. It would kill him again but he was ready. “She was a hot little redhead with big boobs. I don’t think you’ll be able to make me forget her.”

The baby’s other hand sailed past his nose. Marie caught it and tucked it back in the blanket. She leaned across the baby and kissed him.

“Thank you, Adam. Our daughters are precious.”

This is how he dreamed it would be. That glitter in her eyes and quaver in her voice. Happiness too big for words. It was almost how he dreamed it. Her lips seemed a little too warm. Her hair clung in damp tendrils around her face. Fever he thought, but breaking.

“Where’s Ean?”

“Your brother ordered him to bathe and go to bed.”

“My brother?” He didn’t have a brother.

“Yes, looks just like you. Maybe he’s a little younger.” She held up three fingers. “How many fingers do you see?”

His hand closed over hers. “More than I can count.”

His father was still around then, it irritated that even Marie thought his father younger than him. “Where is this ‘brother’ of mine?”

“He went to get me a drink of water.”

Jake strolled through the door with a tray. Adam relaxed. It was all just a dream then. No complicated destinies to worry over. But Jake didn’t look a thing like him. And he didn’t look younger. Jake brought tea, not water, a pot of it and two cups. Marie drank hers. She was yawning halfway through the cup.

Adam sniffed at the cup Jake held to his lips. “Valerian?” There was no mistaking that herb’s stinky-sock smell.

“Among other things. Just drink it. It’ll help your headache.” He had to suffer the humiliation of Jake holding his head and pouring tea into him one sip at a time. The baby had more strength than he did.

“Anything I can get you?” Jake asked.

“An amputation kit.”

He was so tired the effort to swallow tea left him exhausted.

“No need for all that. Ean patched up what being absorbed by your lady didn’t fix. The magus intends to shift you two when he gets back. He just needed a little time to recharge his circuits.” Jake pulled the blankets higher over Adam’s chest.

It rankled, that Jake was tucking him in, that he needed Jake to tuck him in.

“Back from where?” So, Marie had indeed been chatting with his father. His head hurt too much to figure out what Jake meant by absorption. It didn’t mean the rest wasn’t a dream, something fueled by his father’s presence. The memory didn’t fade as a dream would. The ache, homesickness for what he’d left behind, wouldn’t leave him.

“Not sure where he was headed. He said something about a barn. Eight hours in tiger form will put you both right again. He said under no circumstances are either of you to try shifting on your own.”

“No worries there,” Adam said. “I couldn’t raise enough energy to shift my eye color.” The heightened metabolism in tiger form would speed the healing, but judging by the way he felt now Adam thought he might have to spend a week shifted to feel normal again.

Jake left the tray and took the baby away. Adam wondered how much of the past day was dream, and how much reality. Everything was real and nothing was. It was the first thing his father taught him.

Marie turned over and snuggled back against him, tucking his arm firmly around her waist. He decided he knew all that mattered. She still loved him.

## Chapter Fourteen

Ean could have slept for a month. He managed to get in a couple of hours before a pounding at the front door woke him. He rolled off the couch and staggered toward the hall. The magus beat him to it. “Good evening, Officer. Or should that be morning?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, sir. I’m looking for...” Ean heard papers rattle. “Adam Kamenev.”

“I’m Marcus St. Germain, his father.”

“Is your son in?”

“He and his lovely bride are on their honeymoon. I’m watching over the house and the grandchildren. Would you like to come in?”

Ean shook his head. The magus just invited trouble right in the door.

“No, sir. I had a report about an animal attack I have to check out. I wanted your son’s permission to have a look along the property on the other side of the river.”

Ean was fully awake now. Crap. They hauled their butts out of one mess and landed smack in the middle of another.

“No problem. Let me know if you need anything.”

Ean wanted to leap forward and slap his hand over the magus’s mouth.

“Yes sir. Thank you. And just one question for you, if you could. Have you noticed any sign of, um, a large cat?”

Ean stepped softly to the window. The patrol car was in the drive, lights flashing. The county sheriff. The cop who had stopped them on the road had been in a state police car.

“What sort of cat?”

“A big, black one. About six hundred pounds.”

“Has there been some sort of zoo escape. A panther maybe?”

“There’s no need to worry sir. The gentleman reporting was somewhat incoherent. It’s probably nothing. He did say a black tiger.”

“A black tiger, really? I didn’t know there was such a thing.”

“According to the report, it had silver stripes.”

“Ah, sounds like the gentleman was under a chemical influence, perhaps?”

“Perhaps. I have to investigate his claim.”

“I don’t envy you your job, Officer, hauled out in weather like this.”

The sleet had stopped but a bitter wind howled and the temperature hovered near zero. The cold sweep of air around the door and across the floor numbed Ean’s toes.

“I’m sorry to bother you. His account is somewhat muddled but it involves a man possibly hurt or missing.”

“Not a problem.”

“Thank you Mr. St. Germain. There’s probably nothing to this.”

The door closed. Ean stayed by the window until he saw the car pull away.

“I’ll get Maya up,” he told the magus. “Can we leave through the mirror? Will there be any adverse effects to the babies?”

“Ean. Go back to bed. He won’t find any black tigers stalking defenseless citizens.”

“We have one in the bed upstairs, sleeping right next to a white tiger.”

“Which is why he won’t find one.”

“When he finds that man mauled to death by a tiger, when he sees the bloody mess in the barn, he’ll call in searchers. They will come for us. It might take a few hours for them to make a connection, but Marie had a little run-in with the law before.”

“The man by the river has a hole in his chest from a shotgun, the same gun that left a hole in my son. Adam didn’t kill, or maul, anyone.”

Ean absorbed that, trying to figure it out. Possibly one man had aimed for Adam and the friend caught the bullet instead. It was hard to imagine what might have transpired in the chaotic confrontation they’d heard.

“They aren’t going to have to do much in the way of forensic research to figure out the guy was killed by his drunk buddy,” the magus said.

“They will look in the barn.”

“And find nothing. I cleaned up there after I sent you to bed.”

Ean sat on the couch. It just seemed too easy. Lilly hopped from under the coffee table onto the couch beside him.

“Do you know how Adam and Marie got their bodies tangled? Did you find any hint?” Lilly nudged her way onto Ean’s lap.

“I didn’t. I suspect the baby had something to do with it. She was clearly behind that episode upstairs tonight. Neither Adam nor Marie were in any condition to shift up. They skipped right past the shift plane and wound up in the next realm.”

“Lovely,” Ean said, leaning back. Lilly stretched out across his chest. He couldn’t believe the baby had survived the shift apparently unharmed. As he understood things, only the dying and the magus could travel to the next realm. “All we need is a dimension-hopping infant to keep life interesting. Will we have to line her bassinet with tin foil?”

“I’m sure we’ll figure something out. In the meantime, no one will come searching the house for tiger people. Get some sleep.”

The magus grabbed a comforter from the back of the couch and tossed it over Ean who felt his eyelids losing the battle to stay open.

“They will be busy for the next few hours,” the magus said. “By the time they come back to talk to me, there will be no tigers, just a lot of sleepy people and hungry babies.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Stillness and the vacant space at his side alerted Adam that Marie was gone. He started awake, and nearly passed out under the wave of pain that rolled through him when he tried to sit.

A steady hand on his shoulder, another pressed over his abdomen, drew the pain away.

“No,” he gritted out. “Save your strength for the others.”

“She’s fine,” his father promised, urging him to lie back, pulling covers across his chest. “She’s in the nursery watching her babies sleep.”

Adam lay back. “The babies. All female.” He should have stayed in that dream world. What lay ahead? How many daughters would the wasting snatch from their arms?

“A treasure that could save the Panthera tribe,” his father said.

“If they live. What are the odds one will make it?”

His father looked away. One in ten. They both knew the answer. Not good enough to guarantee one child would survive.

“I don’t hold with the theory that the wasting is entirely genetic,” he said. “You’ve never found the gene responsible.”

“It’s not environmental. Not contagious. It occurs among all the Pantherian tribes. Humans don’t have a comparable affliction. It has to be genetic, unique to shifters.”

“Even if it is genetic, I don’t believe you have to worry. These babies are vibrant, bursting with life. And you don’t need DNA studies to see Marie’s daughters are different. A shifting infant?”

“I didn’t dream that?”

His father just looked at him.

Chapter Fifteen

“It’s time,” Marie said.

She and Adam had recovered their health in the weeks since the birth. It was time to recover the romance. Could she sense his longing? Ean suspected she did—a sense of impending loss so raw and resonant he thought it must echo like a gong each time he looked at her. He fought to keep his mind closed, silent and still as a river rock.

Marie was inviting him to join them but as much as he wanted to go, it was his turn to play hero. It wasn’t like he really belonged with them. In the beginning, she had accepted him to please Adam. And then, for a time, she took him to get back at Adam. He didn’t want to be a duty when there was peace, nor a weapon in the wars that cropped up between lovers.

He shook his head and backed away, hovering at the threshold of the balcony doors. She followed. The sky glittered with the crisp light of a thousand stars that seemed to wink in time with spring peepers trilling along the riverbanks. An owl’s shadow slid over the moonlit yard. Ean tasted the night air, pulling in the earthy scent of woodland waking from winter sleep. Of all the things tugging the tiger in him toward the night and his mate, it was her cool fingers skimming up his arm, moist lips pressed against his ear, which nearly sent him roaring over the edge.

Adam lingered at the rail, his expression thoughtful. Adam had been willing to die to save her, willing to leave Marie and their children in Ean’s care. This time, Ean had the power to draw danger away.

It was time. Time for Ean to stand aside and out of the way. Time to save this family, this second chance he’d been given after losing his first mate. He still didn’t know what he could have changed to save Leah. This time he could lead danger away, make a sacrifice to keep them safe.

“You go ahead,” he told them. “I’ll catch up with you.”

Marie grabbed the hem of the t-shirt—the only thing she was wearing—and tugged it over her head. Long red hair spilled over creamy shoulders, over her breasts. Her nipples were rosy nubs, peeking between curls, begging for a lick. Ean ground his teeth into his tongue. His mind reached out for some thought, anything that would give him the strength to turn and walk away.

A baby’s cry rescued him. Marie bent to retrieve her shirt, which put his gaze on a collision course with her luscious bottom. He shoved his hands in his back pockets, wishing it were that easy to shackle his imagination. Adam crossed his arms over his chest and leaned a hip against the rail, frowning hard at Ean, gaze drifting from Ean’s pocketed hands to Marie.

Once Adam’s suspicions were aroused, they weren’t easily allayed. Ean would have to touch her. Act calm. Stay cool. He didn’t feel cool or calm when his hands connected with her bare shoulders. Or when she straightened, her breasts bobbing enticingly. The silkiness of her skin sliced at his willpower. He pushed her toward Adam with more force than he intended. He tried to smooth things over with a light tone.

“Go on. I’ll get the baby and catch up with you later.”

Adam caught Marie’s hand when she started to argue. He pulled her to him, cupping the back of her head with one hand, taking her captive with that mesmerist’s stare he used to get his way.

“We’ll wait for you at the river, Ean,” he said.

Ean ducked back into the dark bedroom. He waited long enough to watch Adam shift Marie and himself before they leapt from the balcony.

He slipped back out to watch Marie racing across the yard toward the river with Adam not far behind. His last look. They were beautiful. A perfect pair. The white tiger and the black—mirrored opposites that made a whole without him to muck up the pattern.

He bent to pick up Marie’s shirt, press it to his face, inhale her scent. Her flavors gathered on his tongue. He smiled to himself, recalling the expression on her face the first time Adam shifted her and she discovered the full flavor of scents. He couldn’t suppress a shiver at the memory of her busy tongue. Then he sighed. How could he pull strength from the well he’d tapped too often these past few months? With hope gone dry, how could he walk away from the one thing that promised renewal?

To save them. That was how. He’d best do it quick, tonight, while they were off together. He folded her shirt, and the memories of her inside it, a keepsake to warm him through the lonely nights ahead. He tucked it into the duffle bag he had waiting under the bed.

Another cry from Aleah brought his head up. Time to say goodbye to his daughters.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marie dove into the river and water plumed around her as she raced ahead. Adam hung back savoring the beauty of her joy, the ebb and flow of her body gathering and releasing power in graceful strides. A silly owl nearly dropped his tail feathers when she made a twenty-foot leap that could have snatched him from the sky. Marie’s jaws snapped shut inches from the little fellow’s tail, sending him swooping for the safety of tangled branches.

Marie landed facing him, tongue lolling in a tiger version of laughter. Her eyes had a come-closer-big-boy look. Her eyelids did a sensual droop and lift. Rising desire pushed aside his lingering worry over Ean.

*Have I told you, she said, what an incredibly handsome tiger you are?*

Her telepathic voice had a simmering, sexual quality that pushed every button she aimed for. His tail rose in an hypnotic sway, his tongue flicked out and back in—moves that usually lured her closer.

She tossed her head, turned it to the side.

Playing hard to get was she?

Adam leapt from the bank. Water plumed carrying a rippling arc of color over their heads, a moonbow. She caught her breath and looked back at him when it vanished, as if he had worked some sort of magic just for her. Maybe he had, because love made him feel magical, made him believe that they could beat all the obstacles headed their way. Her love made him believe he could leap high enough to snatch the moon from the sky and set it at her feet. He nuzzled her face, licked her ears.

*We have to wait for Ean.*



Ean. Reality penetrated his romantic mood. *Something's up with Ean, love. He's closed up, guarding some secret.*

She turned, licking him under his chin, a spot that could turn him from mighty, black tiger to mewing cub.

*Call him.* Her words purred down his spine. *I can make him talk.*

Adam sent a call.

*He says start without him. He'll be along soon.*

*We're not starting without him.*

Since Marie couldn't send thoughts more than a few feet, Adam relayed the message and turned his attention to changing her mind.

*You can practice your interrogation technique on me while we wait.*

Marie purred. *Brave boy.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Marisa fretted in her grandfather's arms. Ean paused to touch her cheek on his way to collect Aleah. The baby went still under his touch. Her eyes focused on him, intent blue-black pools, almost as if she knew. Guilt, he decided. His own guilty conscience pecked at him over taking the coward's way out and slipping off without saying goodbyes—or getting tangled in all the arguments they would throw at him. The babies had a way of looking wise, like they knew secrets, and Ean shook off the feeling, turning to lift Aleah and then scooping up Lara in his other arm.

A row of bassinets lined one wall, a row of rockers the other. Ean dropped into a chair next to the magus, nudging a carton of diapers aside with his foot to gain legroom. In the month since the births, gear had accumulated in heaps around the tidy nursery. Even Adam's powers of organization failed under the combined force of seven little girls.

The moon illuminated the nursery, milky light casting the room in shades of blue. Jake would put in an appearance soon, but for now, there were only three on duty. Maya was walking the floor with a baby on her shoulder. She grabbed two bottles from the warmer and helped Ean juggle the task of getting bottles into two mouths at once.

Aleah fixed him with a dark-eyed stare while her mouth worked the nipple. He hadn't thought there was a power on earth that would move him to resist Marie's tongue against his ear, or a seductive invitation whispered to his mind. The distressed whimper of his daughter was a force—one with potential the girls had barely tapped—beyond any he'd encountered. It was for them that he would go now. Of everyone here, he was the most likely to draw the trouble stalking them.

This would be his last time rocking babies in the nursery. He lifted his head breathing the scent of milk and baby powder and new babies. Even Marisa's fretting, a background noise like static on a radio, would be missed.

Her grandfather never lost patience with her constant need for attention. She was rarely out of his arms. He'd ruin her, but Ean left him to it. Adam would intervene before she was hopelessly spoiled.

The slightest hum of tension disturbed her. Ean was still giving serious thought to a tinfoil liner in the bassinet, or maybe a foil nightie. Only the magus, with an aura that could shield her from a nuclear blast, could coax those little blue eyes to close. He was just the security blanket she needed while adjusting to life outside her mother.

Ean could sympathize with Marisa's clinging. The current discussion had him wishing he could go back and tuck into the safe harbor of his family. But the isle of Pantheria was not the paradise it used to be. And his family couldn't shelter him from choices made and results reaped. Ean shifted his weight as gently as he could, Lara already asleep in the crook of his right arm and Aleah inching toward sleep in his left.

"It has to be a clean break," the magus was saying. He spoke in the hushed tones drowsy babies inspired. "The law demands custody of the children go to the tribe when you break the reproduction mandates. You can't respond to any queries or contact any old friends. No one knows where the two of you are and Adam keeps to himself. No one will discover the girls or Marie if we keep it that way."

"Suits me just fine," Maya mumbled. She plunked down in a chair next to Ean.

"It's easier said than done. You don't appreciate the network of support you had. Friends and relatives have always been there if you needed advice, needed a hand. You're stepping into a life that has no safety net, save the one we weave here, between the six of us. It will be like walking a high wire, with only a spider web to catch any misstep."

"It's not like we have a choice," Maya said. "It's done."

"I wouldn't change what's done." Ean paused to plant a kiss on Aleah's forehead. Startled, her foot kicked out and thumped Lara's elbow. Lara wriggled, her fists opened and closed. When she yawned, a tiny milk bubble formed between her lips. So of course, Ean had to kiss her too, a soft touch of lips to the fluff of red hair, before he picked up his thought. "The sacrifice is worth the reward."

Homesickness tightened his chest. Never seeing Pantheria again was a high price. He looked into his daughters' faces, ready to pay a higher price to keep them. The magus was wrong. Pulling together wasn't what they needed now. He was first on the list of people Maya would contact for help. If he vanished, lived wild in the deep forests of the Blue Ridge, they'd never find him, couldn't peel truth from his mind that would lead to his forbidden family.

"We don't need them," Maya said. She was rocking so hard Elise threw out both tiny arms as if she expected to take flight. "I'm looking forward to having my own place, having a job."

"What?" Ean stopped rocking.

"Marie said I can live in her old apartment and Jake has a job for me."

"No he doesn't, and no you won't," Ean said. Impossible. Had they lost their minds?

"It's really not up to you." Maya's tone dismissed him.

"Magus, make her understand. This world doesn't value females. It is nothing like what she is accustomed to. It will eat her alive!"

"Despite what your superior maleness may think," Maya spat, her whisper fierce, "I am not some

ignorant child that needs things explained to me.”

Marisa waved her arms and whimpered. The magus put her to his shoulder and patted her back. “Enough,” he told them. “Ean, she has to make her own life.”

And wasn’t that what he was about to do? Ean opened his mouth to argue anyway, but couldn’t dredge up a good rebuttal. The Magus had an annoying habit of being perpetually right.

“Yes sir,” he mumbled. And to Maya, “Sorry.”

“I don’t suppose Adam mentioned that Jake and I are living in the area.”

The magus meant it as a comfort, Ean was sure. Somehow, he wasn’t comforted by thought of Maya involved in their oddball experiments.

Maneuvering carefully, so as not to disturb the sleeping girls, Ean rose. He settled Aleah in one bed and Lara in the next, going back to tuck each in when his hands were free. Erin was awake, sucking her fingers, waiting patiently for someone to produce her dinner. Ean lifted her to his shoulder and grabbed a fresh bottle from the warmer. The baby’s breath was warm against his neck. It softened the tight knot in his belly. He nuzzled the soft spot in her head, breathing the flowery little-girl scent. Did anything smell as sweet?

“No, Adam didn’t mention it,” Ean said, settling into the rocker and tucking the bottle into Erin’s rounded mouth. “I guess we haven’t had time to catch up on the social news.”

He was pouting. He hated the petty feeling, but he knew, without hearing the arguments, that Maya would win and would wind up someplace with no one to look out for her. And yet, Maya with the magus was an arrangement that would cushion Adam, keep attention from wandering in his direction.

“Males are strangling the female force, Ean,” the magus continued. “If we’re to discover a cure for the wasting, it has to be approached in a non-traditional way. That starts with letting go of traditions that stifle females.”

“So, we just let the maniacs roaming the streets have at her?”

“How about,” Maya said, rising and carrying Elise to her bed, “we trust her wisdom to guide her. Maybe we could even include her in the discussion instead of talking around her.”

The magus closed his eyes, still patting Marisa’s back, still rocking.

With the last baby tucked in, Maya kissed Ean’s cheek and headed for the door. “I love you too,” she said, “but I can’t live with you.”

Seven daughters. One mate. One sister. It hit him then, for the first time in his life, he was in a place where females outnumbered males. How long would the numbers hold?

“They are healthy girls, Ean,” the magus said breaking into his thoughts. “There’s no sign of wasting sickness in any of them. The mutation that produced Marie protects them all.”

“So you and Adam have concluded Marie is a genetic aberration?”

“There are no genetic engineering facilities capable of producing Pantherians. They can produce chimera, a hybrid of animal, but not Pantherians. The ability to shift between species eludes them. At the time Marie was conceived, they hadn’t even mastered cloning.”

“Then she would have to have come from Pantheria. But there is no record of her birth.”

Marisa’s fretful wail interrupted. The magus cupped his hand behind her head. She sighed nuzzling into his neck.

“Having studied this teleporting and shifting skill that Marisa displays, I suspect some similar situation separated Marie from her family. My best guess is that someone broke reproduction mandates and tried to conceal the offspring. Perhaps the trauma of losing her family caused Marie to suppress her tiger nature and unique talents. Or, it may have been the need to conform to human expectations. We can only guess at the details.”

The conclusions made sense. If Marie’s genes protected the girls from the wasting, and every force their grandfather could call up would be enlisted to make them safe, nothing else mattered. The shadow that haunted Ean lifted. Maybe Maya was right. They’d used up all the bad karma life had stored up for them and were turning the corner into the good times. Ean intended to make sure of it.

Marisa moved from fretting to wails that wrung Ean’s heart. The magus hustled to the door, his tone a rushed whisper. “I’ll take her downstairs where she can’t wake the others.”

The change in scenery quieted Marisa. Ean listened to the magus’s light steps descending, replaced by a heavier step ascending and the scrabble of Lilly’s paws close behind. Lilly waited for Jake’s arrival each evening. The night shift was here and Ean had a journey ahead. He looked around the quiet nursery, pain swelling in a tide that squeezed his heart into a small corner of his chest. A tiger called from the forest—Marie, tempting him with a feline love song.

## Chapter Sixteen

They were nose to nose, the river running cold fingers through their fur. Marie’s warm breath mingled with Adam’s. Nothing could feel as perfect as this letting go, eyelids half closed. A frog watched them between blades of grass a few feet away. And a doe had gathered the courage to graze on lush grass between river and wood, a pair of fawns close to her side.

Marie lifted a paw and batted gently at Adam’s head. He growled softly and bumped her chest, sending her backward into soft fiddlehead ferns along the bank. She rolled to her back, her head resting in the ferns while her body floated in water. He took advantage and pinned her under him while she continued to bat at him.

He licked her chest, his tongue savoring the taste and glide of fur. His eyelids drooped and his purr flowed over her. He was thinking that Ean was going to miss out when Marie went rigid under him. Her head snapped right, connecting with his so hard he saw stars. It happened so fast. He hit river bottom and was inhaling waterweeds before he understood she was gone.

He lunged for the surface, sending the frog diving for safety and the doe leaping into the forest.

No Marie.

He blew water from his nose and sneezed twice. It still felt like he had a thousand needles stabbing his nasal passage. The night had gone quiet, all the creatures hidden in the greenery cautious of him. Or was it something else they feared? He couldn't catch her scent and called out telepathically.

His father responded. *Is Ean with you?* Adam could feel the desperation attached to inquiry crawl through his brain.

*No. And Marie just vanished.*

*So has Marisa. I can't call Ean. He's been guarded all evening, but now he is shut tight. I can't even feel a glimmer of Marisa's presence.*

Adam tried calling Ean, a panicked vibration hammering the thought plane. No response.

With a leap and a shake that showered the shrubbery, Adam exited the river.

*I'll check the yard. You check through the house.*

Stripped of all the extrasensory ways to connect, they were reduced to searching on foot, with the basic five senses.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ean strode along the road's edge, each scuff of his boot sent white stones skittering across the smooth asphalt. This section leading to Adam's house was deserted, but when he hit the main road he could hitch a ride. It was a perfect plan. Everyone was distracted. No one would notice his absence until he was safely away.

Then a snow-white cub materialized like a ghost, right in the center of the road. Terror punched through him.

Marisa. He dropped his bag and lunged for her, his hands closed around empty air. A rustle behind him spun him around and there she was at the roadside, laughing eyes, batting the air with one paw.

This time Ean inched closer. "You know Daddy doesn't want you shifting. It's not good for little girls."

A giggle rippled through his mind and she vanished again. Ean threw up his hands. Telepathy at her age? Telepathy that could penetrate the lock he'd had on his thoughts, apparently. How were they supposed to keep a child like this alive?

"Marisa," he said aloud, "you're scaring the life out of me. Show yourself. Right now!"

Another giggle. It was such a light happy sensation it almost pried a smile from him. He was not going to think of the implications. She could not manipulate his mood!

A branch rustled above his head. She was walking along a limb that didn't look sturdy enough to suit Ean. This was why shifting was a skill that came with adolescence. Power without wisdom to control it could be deadly.

"Marisa, come down," Ean pleaded. She stretched out on the branch, chin resting on a clump of tiny

oak leaves, paws dangling.

Ean studied the tree. There was no way the limb would hold if he went after her. By the time he got halfway to her, she'd vanish again.

"Marisa, Daddy has to go somewhere very important. You're making him late."

An energy burst behind him, knocked Ean flat on his face.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Nothing. Not a trace of either one,* Adam called to his father.

Panic turned his legs to water and his brain to mush. Why would they vanish? Why wouldn't they answer?

*Reach for your center, son. You need a clear head.*

His father was right. But Adam's family was his center now. How could he find balance with part of it missing?

*Have you found anything?*

*No sign. Unless the rabbit counts.*

*Has Lilly vanished too?*

*No, but she's planted herself at the front window and she keeps thumping her foot.*

*I'll check the front yard again.*

He hoped he wasn't wasting precious time. Lilly could be spooked by a circling owl. It wasn't like he could have overlooked two tigers in his first pass, but there was nothing else to go on.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marie could have knocked both their heads together.

Ean picked himself up from the ground, holding his nose with one hand, brushing his clothes off with the other.

Come down, Marisa.

Marisa scrabbled and gained her feet, swaying on wobbly legs for a heart-stopping moment before she righted herself and launched from the branch to Marie's back.

Only when she felt the pad of small paws up her spine, the wobbly balance of her daughter making her way to her shoulders and then up onto her head, did Marie relax. It nearly stopped her heart when she felt a stab of pain in her brain, a picture of Marisa in tiger form piercing her awareness and then blinking out. She'd latched onto that signal like a homing device and come close to materializing inside Ean. The baby was licking her ears, an attempt to soothe her mother.

*Go to Grandfather, sweetie. Understand?*

*Pop Pop.*

Ean let go of his nose, it had a bloody scrape along the ridge, but his smile told Marie he heard too. Marisa's first word.

*Yes, Pop Pop. Go now.*

In a flash she was gone.

Ean tipped his head sideways, listening. "He has her." Ean winced. "He has a lot to say about all of us leaving without a word." And then he added, "So does Adam."

So did she, but communicating mentally frustrated her. Ean wasn't capable of shifting her. And while she didn't doubt Adam would appear within a few minutes, there were things Ean needed to know now.

She stalked toward him, tail whipping back and forth like a snake. He held up a hand. "This was not my fault. I did not bring her out here."

He was exactly the reason Marisa had come, but that wasn't the issue she needed to tackle now. Marie rose up on her rear legs, wrapped her forepaws around Ean's neck and rested her chin on his shoulder. Was it possible to will his mind to open to her love? He swayed a bit under her weight. His arms stayed at his sides.

*Love you, Ean.*

*Marie—*

*Love you, Ean. Don't leave me.*

His arms went around her. She angled her head, licked his battered nose and licked tears from his cheeks.

"I just want you safe, sweetheart."

*Only together. We're only safe together. Even the baby knows that.*

As soon as she materialized to find Ean on the road and the baby trying to delay him, Marie understood the true source of the problem. She'd only just managed to convince Adam that she needed both men in her life. Now Ean. Insecurity wasn't something she'd expected from her big, bad tiger-men.

"Marie. Sweetheart...it's complicated."

*Can't be without you, Ean. Can't do this without you.*

*If I go away it will keep you safe, sweetheart.*

*I don't know why we get these urges to run, Ean. Maybe it's a tiger thing. I know running feels like an answer. You feel in control alone. But I've learned going it alone doesn't solve anything.*

He was rigid, a wall of resistance. She couldn't find words to break through.

*You gone leaves a hole in us, Ean, makes us all weaker. Do you remember how you felt when I was the one running?*

He pressed his face into her neck, clutching fistfuls of her fur. A tremor rattled through him, a slight waver in his determination that she dove for with the last thing she had to offer—her last island of independence.

*If you need to get us away from here, I have a place up in the mountains. My safe place. Even Adam doesn't know about it. We'll move, but we all go. We stick together.*

It was like launching herself from an airplane with no chute. Marie's stomach had that same queasy feeling it got when she looked down from high places. A private space to escape to had always felt as necessary as air. Ean, with his head pressed to her chest, must hear the rapping of her heart against her ribs, notice the staccato pant that didn't bring enough air to her lungs. It didn't help that his arms closed tight enough to make her ears pop.

"How?" he asked. "How am I supposed to say no to you sweetheart? I should. I know I should. But I know what it cost you to make that offer."

*We all go?*

"Together," he agreed. Then he added. "Brace yourself for a talking-to. Here comes the boss."

She turned, gauging Adam's mood by his approach. He limped and his breath had a hitch. His step had lost its pep and his fur rippled with agitation. He shifted as soon as he reached them. The better to fill their ears with his displeasure, she supposed.

"I want to know how you do it." He rubbed his thigh around the thick scar tissue. "This teleporting thing...you can't shift, but you can blink all over creation?"

Marie yawned—the tiger version of a shrug—and sat back on her haunches. *I don't know how to explain. Lilly taught me.*

"The rabbit?" Both men said it together.

"I might have known," Adam growled. "Any gift from my father should be regifted. Quickly. And as far away as possible."

A soft breeze stirred the branches and set shadows rippling across Adam's naked body in an intriguing way, dark fingers that beckoned.

"Don't look at me like that, love. I have a few things to say. Which one of you wants to tell me what this is all about?" His gaze flicked to the duffle bag floating in a drainage ditch, to Marie, then to Ean. No one volunteered.

But Marie was ready to change the subject. The rest of this discussion could wait until they'd dispelled some tension.



She caught the neck of Ean's jacket with her teeth and tugged. *Get naked for me, Ean.*

Adam folded his arms. "I'm waiting for an answer."

Ean tugged back. "Okay, I'll get naked. But, I really like this jacket so let me. And maybe we should go home first?"

Marie flicked her tongue over his ear. *Ever hear that song, why don't we do it in the road? I really like that song.*

She had their attention now. Adam looked like he'd forgotten to be bossy. Certainly, he was willing to leave off the interrogation for now. He was good at knowing when to let something go.

And Ean, well he looked like leaving was the farthest thing from his mind. Their mouths were hanging open and their eyes had a primitive gleam.

Marie leapt over Adam's head and bolted down the road toward home, certain Adam would find new energy and Ean would lose his clothes before she made it back.

They were slower than she thought.

Marie raced across the yard, her breath coming in quick puffs, power making her giddy. It wasn't easy to stay ahead of Adam but the trees gave her an advantage. Males weren't agile. She heard a thud and a grunt or two when he misjudged his turns. Ean sprang from behind a hedge when she broke through the trees onto the lawn. Surprise slowed her enough for Adam to tackle her. The three of them tumbled together in cool grass. Her heart hammered.

The scent and weight of males was too good to resist. She rolled to her back, batting at them with her paws, careful to keep her claws in. Ean shifted and sat astride her belly. His cock, thick and ready, nestled against her fur. Adam shifted and rubbed his face against her furry cheek. She inhaled his scent like a drug she craved, tasted it with her tongue. Her mouth went dry, all the moisture in her body seemed to be gathering in an alternate location. That sweet ache bloomed between her legs and through her belly. Moonlight gleamed on Adam's skin. Starlight danced in Ean's eyes. Shamelessly, they rubbed their naked bodies against her, a sensual slide of skin over fur. She wanted them as a woman, wanted her naked skin sliding over theirs.

Her mind touched Adam's with a plea. *Shift me.*

His teeth nipped her ear. "You have to learn to do that on your own."

*Not now. No tiger lessons now!*

She wriggled, dumping Ean to the ground. He rose, the light casting his body in angles and shadows her tongue needed to explore. She licked her lips. His cock bobbed as he moved. Her mouth watered. She started to purr.

She licked a path from Adam's ankle to his knee, paused there. She gave the inside of his thigh the tiniest lick. A salty tang spread over her tongue.

*Pretty please, Adam? I'll make you smile.* And she added, *I'll make you both insanely happy!* She purred louder, hoping to seduce.

Ean cleared his throat. "Pretty please, Adam?"

Adam folded his arms, standing above her, legs spread in firm stance. His gaze determined. His mind set. He shook his head. She loved his stern, frosty side. It made her want to wrap herself around him and melt him like snow. It made her hot enough to do it. It usually made her able to do whatever it took to have him, but her last attempt at shifting hadn't gone well.

"You can do it, Marie. Try for me."

She rolled to her feet. All she had to do was call up the energy. Her purr disappeared. She couldn't.

*It's not fair, she pleaded. You shifted me to come out and play. Shift me back.*

Adam's arms remained folded. She looked to Ean and he shook his head. He always took Adam's side.

"It's safe, love," Adam told her. "I promise you it's safe. You can't hurt us."

"We can make you very happy," Ean coaxed.

She tossed her head back and looked up to the moon, felt the breeze ruffle her fur. She opened that place right in her center and the humming started, singing in her bones, spreading out through her body to the tips of her fur, rising, carrying her up vibrating until she was a light cloud on another plane. And she hung there.

This was the part she couldn't work out. It was like she was a program stuck in a loop. She didn't want to be stuck. She had something else she really wanted to get back to.

It hit her then, that was exactly where she was, in a loop and to escape she needed to call herself, call the part of herself she wished to be. Marie had to be willing to be who she was, the tiger and the woman. She had to be willing to own her power.

She snapped back to human shape with such force it knocked Adam and Ean down. Her landings still needed work.

Adam reached up, grabbed her wrist, and pulled her down beside him. She sighed, rubbing her skin over his in a slow, lingering, feline way. His eyes glowed and he purred. Ean settled beside them and rubbed his chest against her back. His nipples were hard pebbles against her shoulder blades.

"Don't do that," she said, "you're making me drip all over Adam's leg."

Both men purred louder, like jet engines. She especially liked the way Adam's chest vibrated against her nipples, and the throbbing purr of Ean's cock sliding back and forth over her dew slick petals. Adam's tongue vibrated, licking a path from her neck to her ear. Ean's fingers vibrated, stroking her bottom. Marie decided tiger men definitely had a lot to offer. She curled her fingers around Adam's hard cock and sent out some good vibrations of her own. Skin gathered, rippling as her fingers worked pleasure up, then down.

"Mmm...I love you," he whispered.

"Turn around, then, and let me make you smile."

He did. She took his cock in her mouth as Ean's slid into her pussy.

"So hot," Ean sighed.

Adam's tongue licked her mound, sending needles of pleasure through her with each raspy stroke. His tongue's tip found and hummed against her clit. Sparks burst like fireworks behind her eyes.

It made her clamp so tight around Ean's cock that he moaned, "I love you more."

*I think highly of you both*, she teased. Her mouth was filled with Adam, so she couldn't say it. But they knew. They knew they were loved. She heard it in their sighs and purrs and moans—a unique language. Their love language. Love rose in her, like energy gathering for a shift.

Yes.

Ean's cock pumped faster, urgently. Slick, throbbing heat inside her. Her tongue swirled over the tip of Adam's cock, nuzzled that little hole in the tip. His almond taste seeped onto her tongue. He was close. He growled. She smiled around him. She imagined the same dribbling from Ean's cock mixing with her own juices.

Adam's tongue circled her clit, fast little flicks that said he was ready. Her muscles tightened around Ean, quick squeezing motions to match Adam's pace.

Yes.

Spring pulsed in the earth under them, energy rose through them like the sap rising in the trees. Passion bubbled, scenting the air with promise.

Ean was panting, his breath hot on her shoulder, his teeth nipping.

Adam roared, pushing into her mouth, exploding like a fountain on her tongue, flowing and flowing. Ean roared, his cock jerking and spilling while she squeezed around him, milking his pleasure. Ean's teeth sank into her shoulder unlocking her. She threw her head back letting Adam go as her own orgasm exploded.

"Yes," she cried out. "Yes. Yes. Yes."

They curled together as tigers in the peace that followed, the earth their mattress, the stars their blanket. She was snuggled between two sexy males. Their story was just beginning. With Adam and Ean at her side, no challenge was insurmountable. They'd said they couldn't promise her a fairy tale life. They'd given her something better, a tiger's tale. She didn't doubt there was a happily ever after out there somewhere.

About the Author

Whether writing a shapeshifter romance exploring the primal power of the wild feminine, or BDSM romance where love digs into a character's shadows, Nara believes romance should open the door and push lovers into a new dimension: sexually, emotionally, and sometimes physically.

Nara Malone is an award-winning novelist and poet. As a freelance journalist and writer, her feature profiles on women entrepreneurs and her romantic short stories have been published in newspapers, magazines and digital publications.

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