



# KANE

A BLACK COUGAR NOVEL

ELIZA GAYLE

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A Black Cougar novel by

ELIZA GAYLE

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# Chapter One

Kane opened the door to a wave of thick white smoke, the stench of stale grease, and Ted Nugent wailing from an ancient jukebox in the corner. He stood just inside the door and let his eyes adjust to the scene.

Even with his enhanced vision, it still took a second to get used to the haze and dim interior of the bar—although, he used the term *bar* loosely.

It technically qualified because of the long serving bar along the back wall with the various tequilas, vodkas, and Scotches filling the shelves behind it. The layer of grime and stench in this place would only draw drunks and skanks—which were plentiful in this town, from what he'd seen so far.

He crossed the room and took the only available stool at the bar. He lifted his hand to the bartender, who eventually ambled over.

“What can I get ya?”

“Scotch, neat.” He figured it would be the safest thing to order in a place like this.

*Hell, when did I become such a snob?*

While he waited for his drink, he looked in the mirror on the wall behind the liquor to observe the men lined up at the bar on either side of him. Men of various ages in different degrees of grubby wear, but no one really stood out. He tried to catch the gaze of each and every one of them, looking for someone who might be willing to talk to him.

The bartender returned and slid a drink in front of him. “Anything else I can get ya? You want a menu?”

“No thanks, I’m just here waiting on someone.” That nugget of information seemed to perk up the man’s attention. His eyes glinted in the dim light and his head tilted toward Kane in apparent curiosity.

“Who you waitin’ for? I know just ’bout everyone who comes in here.”

“I’m waiting for a woman.”

The bartender snorted before his face split into a big grin, revealing broken and yellowed teeth. Kane imagined the fights that broke out in this kind of place would eventually lead to a man’s teeth being damaged and more.

“Not a lot of women come in here.”

“Oh yeah, why’s that?” The guy’s smirk aggravated him. Either that or this hunt was beginning to wear thin.

“Not a lot of women come in here on account of Twin Peaks next door. They either go over there to pick up the men getting horny watching the girls dance, or they don’t come within five miles of the place because they don’t want to be caught dead near a titty bar.”

Kane laughed at the statement he understood all too well. He’d spent his fair share of time in those bars, and more. He’d even let his brother Malcolm drag him to a few fetish clubs when they were younger. Some of those clubs would be considered high class compared to this one; so yes, he could well imagine not a lot of women wanting to come near the place.

“I get your point.” He took a swallow of his drink and allowed the slow burn in his throat and belly to comfort him. The liquor wasn’t quite as smooth as he liked it, but he couldn’t complain. It would get the job done.

“So this girl of yours, she got a name?”

“Yeah, she does. It’s Lara. I haven’t seen her in a few weeks, and I’m looking forward to catching up.”

The bartender winked knowingly at him. He had no idea. Kane wanted to find her so he could kill her and go back home, and maybe then he could get her out of his head. Plus, it was never good for a Guardian to stay gone so long. If word got out that the clan wasn’t as protected, it could leave them open to attack or, at the very least, harassment from neighboring clans.

Before he could continue his conversation with the idiot behind the bar, a man stumbled through the door, yanking Kane’s attention in that direction. He was obviously drunk off his ass, but it wasn’t his state of inebriation that had Kane on edge—it was his scent. The man reeked all the way across the room, and the smell had Kane seeing red as he gripped the wooden edge of the bar to keep himself from ripping out the stranger’s throat.

He was covered in the woman’s scent.

*Lara.*

A low growl rumbled in his throat and the bartender shot him a questioning glance. Kane turned away from the door and ground his teeth to hold in the anger. Fur rippled along his skin and his fingers underneath the lip of the bar edge partially shifted to paws and claws as he scraped into the wood.

Kane caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and willed his body to calm. Shifting out in the open was strictly forbidden and could heap a

helluva lot of trouble on him and his kind that they couldn't afford to deal with right now. Not with both of the other Guardians shunned from the clan. He sighed. He missed his brothers and it frustrated the fuck out of him that they were both gone. Especially Lucas. Being shunned for mating with a non-shifter just didn't seem right. She carried his mark, for Christ's sake. Sometimes who you ended up with couldn't always be controlled. *Yeah, keep telling yourself that.*

Another glance in the mirror showed a man not as close to the edge as a few minutes ago. He breathed in deep, letting his lungs fill before slowly releasing the air. He no longer scratched at the bar with claws, and he raised his hand to wipe the sweat that had broken out on his forehead.

He should be happy that someone in the bar carried her scent, for it meant he was getting closer. About fucking time. The rage, though, where the hell was that coming from?

The man seated next to him threw some bills on the bar and walked out, leaving an open stool that the new drunk guy immediately occupied. Kane's groin tightened with the onslaught of Lara's scent, and for once he wished he didn't have heightened senses. His cock swelled against his thigh, thoughts of her even more vivid than they had been in his dreams over the past nights. He had come to dread the time he had to sleep because he always dreamt of her.

Not as the vicious bitch he knew her to be. Oh, no. In his dreams Lara was a lush, naked temptress whom he ached to get his hands on. He thought about licking each and every sweet inch of her, night after night.

"Bartender, bring me a drink. Something strrrrong." The man slurred his words as he ordered, and it brought Kane back to the present. It was the man sitting next to him, a stranger, not the woman.

He had a job to do, and it appeared his luck had finally turned. He had a lead on finding her in the form of a young and stupid drunk.

Kane took another swallow of his drink and grimaced this time over the burn. He would sit here and finish his shitty Scotch and wait. Either this man would start talking or Kane would make him talk when he left the building. He struggled not to groan when some Creedence Clearwater Revival blared from the dusty old juke in the corner.

*Could this place be more stereotypical if it tried?* He didn't think so.

When the bartender set down a shot of tequila in front of the man, he picked it up and turned to Kane. "Here's to good alcohol and hot women."

At the man's words, Kane felt an honest to God tick in his eye and an overwhelming urge to smash his glass into the man's face and wrestle him down to the ground. Somehow he resisted.

"Here, here." He raised his glass in a mock toast. After they had both



taken several more drinks he opted to move in. “Have a good night with a good woman, then?”

“Hell yeah, I did. Fine piece of ass if I do say so myself.”

Kane had to bite his tongue as hatred for this man burned through his veins. He had asked for it, so the least he could do was play along.

“Lucky man. I’m waiting on my girl now. Your girl got a name?”

The man hesitated with the rim of the glass perched on his bottom lip. His eyes were bloodshot as hell and glazed over to the point that Kane wondered how the man could see in front of his face.

“Yeah—uhm—” He hesitated after every word.

“She does or she doesn’t?”

“Well, I’m sure she does, but for the life of me I can’t remember what it was.” He snorted as he tossed down the last of his tequila. His face screwed up at the taste and Kane wondered for a moment if he was going to throw up. Either way, he was prepared to move fast.

“Well, bud, I’m not sure whether that’s good or bad. Guess it depends on if you want to see her again. A woman doesn’t like a man who can’t remember her name.” Kane swallowed back his own urge to vomit at the sight of this lowlife who sure as hell didn’t deserve to even breathe the same air as Lara, let alone fuck her.

*Whoa, where the hell did that come from?*

His words must have hit home as the man turned away from him and called after the bartender again. He even turned to his other side and struck up a conversation with the man sitting there. Damn it!

This wasn’t going to work. Kane obviously couldn’t play nice, and the longer he sat there the stronger the urge became to kill him and put him out of everyone’s misery.

Kane threw down some bills and headed to the parking lot. He could either wait outside and take care of things the old-fashioned way or go next door and wait in the strip club. Either way, he was out of there.

\* \* \* \*

Kane paced along the tree line that surrounded most of the bar parking lot. Two hours had passed and the little shit had yet to come outside. He had leaned against the building wishing for a cigarette, then sat in his Jeep listening to some rock music, and when he finally tired of doing nothing he hit the edge of the woods and shifted. The brush was dense and the parking lot not all that well lit, so it was easy for him to hide without losing sight of the entrance doors to both clubs.

More than once he’d considered the *other* club. He could slip in, find



a nice girl to take him home, and maybe then he would finally stop having all those fucked up thoughts about a woman with a death wish. Strippers were usually a lot of fun, always willing to try new things. Not so uptight like most of the feline bitches in his clan.

A couple of times the door of the club opened and he'd gotten a glimpse of naked flesh wrapped around a silver pole, long dark hair that brushed the ground with every dip, and long, long legs that seemed to go on and on. He shook his muzzle. Yeah, he needed an outlet real bad.

A run would help; it wasn't as if this idiot would be hard to track later. He wanted to talk to him now, though, while her scent was fresh. Kane would give him another ten minutes and then he was going in. He took a few more minutes to enjoy the cool grass underneath his paws, and even scratched at the tree, stretching his legs and sharpening his already lethally sharp claws.

He envisioned being back in human form and he thought of Lara. His body shifted from cougar to human and he looked at himself. It irked him to see his arousal jutting out from his hips. He couldn't understand how thoughts of the woman he'd been sent to kill could make him harder than he'd ever experienced in his life. It wasn't right to want to fuck the woman who'd been trying to kill his brother for weeks. The day Lucas had left the clan he'd received orders to hunt her down and eliminate her. The council didn't like the idea of a witch on the loose who was not only willing and able to use black magic, but had made several attempts on the Guardians. An offense punishable by death.

Yet, every time he closed his eyes he saw images of her. He couldn't deny she was a beautiful woman, even with the constant scowl on her face when looking at him or his brothers. Her eyes, well, they haunted him day and night. She may have been a tough bitch, but if the eyes are supposed to be the windows to the soul, then she hid far more about her than what she allowed on the surface.

He'd seen flashes of anger, distrust, and pain, but there had been even more if he wasn't mistaken, and his instincts usually weren't. She hated them, and he wanted an answer to that. Hatred like he'd seen didn't come from nowhere. There was a lot more to her story and he planned to get to it sooner or later. Once he captured her, the council could afford to wait a few days for him to carry out her sentence. He would have his answers first.

He crossed to the rock he'd stowed his clothes behind and donned his jeans, button-down shirt, and shit kickers. His patience had run out and it was time to go inside and drag the little fucker outside. He stormed across the parking lot once again and the door popped open, and the man Kane

had been waiting for stumbled out. If Kane had thought the man was drunk a couple of hours ago, he was positively loaded now.

This wasn't going to be any fun. While he'd been spoiling for a fight, the stumbling, bleary-eyed man could barely walk let alone take him on. Still, when Lara's scent overpowered the reek of alcohol and sweat, rage bubbled in Kane's blood. This man had done more than just touch her, and for that he should die. She was his.

Fuck! He couldn't keep having stray thoughts like that. It wasn't right. She was a dead woman.

But first...

He grabbed the man by the collar of his shirt and threw him back against the building like a rag doll. The sound of his body crashing might have been loud, but Kane heard nothing beyond the blood rushing in his head. He let out a cry before pouncing against the guy and pinning him to the wall.

"What the—" The man's eyes widened to huge orbs. Shock glared from his face.

"Tell me about her."

"Her? Her who? What the hell?"

Kane shoved his arm across the man's throat and applied hard pressure against the windpipe, cutting off his air supply. "Do not fuck with me. Not if you want to wake up tomorrow to your pitiful existence in this shithole town."

Hands frantically clawed at his forearm as the man struggled for breath, but Kane couldn't be budged. It would be so easy, even in human form, to just kill him. Precious seconds ticked by and he removed his arm, the man falling unconscious to the ground at his feet.

Kane grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and dragged him to the woods. This conversation would be best had in private, and he didn't want to have to take care of someone else who might exit the bar at a really bad time.

He didn't have to walk far before he found a small clearing that even had some light from the near full moon above. He shook the man awake and had to restrain himself from laughing out loud at the fear written all over his face. Served the bastard right.

He took a few steps away. "Don't even think about running. You could never move faster than me and you'll just piss me off even more."

"What do you want from me? I don't have any money."

Kane released a sigh of frustration. "Focus, you idiot. This is not me robbing you. The girl. I want to know everything about the girl."

"What girl?"

Kane crossed back to the man in one big stride and slammed his fist into his face. The man cried out and stumbled back a few feet. His hand cradled his face as drops of blood ran from his nose.

"The girl whose scent is all over you. What do you know about her?"

The man hesitated. He was probably afraid to say the wrong thing.

"You mean the hot chick I met at Junior's earlier this evening?"

Kane glared, waiting for the man to go on.

"Why didn't you just say so, dude? I'm more than happy to pass on her information. She was all over me earlier tonight." When Kane made a move again towards him he raised his hands in resistance. "Whoa, hold on. It was the dance floor. We just danced. She your old lady or something?"

"Or something."

"Well, you might want to have a chat with her, 'cause she was all over every man there. Flirting and rubbing up against them. Hard to resist such a fine, fine woman, you know?"

Kane wondered if this idiot had any brain cells at all. It should have been obvious to anyone by now that he was holding onto control by a thread, yet the asshole kept babbling on about Lara in a way that incited him.

"Where is she?"

"I don't know. Last time I saw her was over at Junior's before he kicked me out. Stupid bastard, I wasn't even doing anything.

"Yeah, I just bet you weren't. Did she say anything at all to you?"

"Just that she wanted to fu—" The man's few smarts must have finally kicked in, or maybe the warning snarl that had escaped Kane's mouth unbidden woke him up.

"What else?"

"That's it. Really, she wanted me to meet her at the Happy Hills Motel for some uhm—further discussion."

"Yeah, I'll just bet she did."

Luckily Kane already knew where the motel was. It sat just a few miles outside the center of town secluded in the woods except for the blinking sign out on the roadside. *Perfect.*

"Leave."

The man stood frozen to the spot, looking confused.

"Leave now or die here." Kane's words finally sank in when the man shuffled past him and headed for the parking lot. Kane waited until he heard a car screeching before he dug into his jeans and pulled out his keys.

He had a bitch to corral.

## *Chapter Two*

Lara smiled to herself as the man stumbled to his car, wild fear evident on his face. His hands shook as he tried to fit his key into the lock, but instead he dropped them to the ground. He had no idea how lucky he was to be walking away from a confrontation with a black cougar. They weren't exactly known for patience or respect for human life.

She curled her upper lip at the sheer brutality of their ways and, even worse, how they followed orders blindly. Just thinking of them disgusted her, especially the one who hunted her. She wondered if he'd figured out yet that the hunter had become the prey.

Tired of watching the nasty man who'd been one of many she had touched tonight in her effort to lure the cougar, she started up her car without the headlights. After a quick U-turn, Lara headed back to the motel to finish her final preparations. She imagined Kane had no trouble getting the information from the weak man and she wanted to be ready to welcome him when he arrived.

She'd set the trap up days ago after leaving a trail into this nothing little mountain town, and Kane had shown up as expected. She was going to have such a good time tonight.

Her chest tightened. If she wanted Kane dead, why in hell did she keep having pangs of regret when she thought about him too long? Not to mention the night sweats and aching arousal that left her panties wet every single day. There was no denying that danger and a dominant man got her going, but this was ridiculous. Normal people weren't supposed to lust after someone they planned to kill. That would be twisted.

Lara shook her head to rid herself of all the crazy thoughts. It was too late to turn back now. Kane was one of them and his turn was here...tonight.

She barreled into the parking lot of the motel, killed her lights once again, and pulled around back. She spotted a black van to park next to and drove into the spot smoothly, listening to her baby rumble. No point in trying to hide, he had her scent and nothing within a fifty-mile radius could conceal her, if that. No, she had laid the trap and all that was left to do was spring it.

She grabbed her shoulder bag and locked up the car before she headed to her room. Nestled in the corner underneath the stairs at the far end of the building, the room was chosen because of its privacy. There were only a few people staying here, so it was unlikely that anyone would interfere, but she did everything possible to avoid unnecessary chances. She had scouted out the town for three days before settling on the perfect location. She'd only get one chance at this, so it had to work. It was time for the cold and heartless cougars to cease existing.

She hurried inside and swung the door closed, purposely leaving it an inch ajar. She threw her bag into the corner of the dingy room as she hustled to check on her supplies. He would be right behind her.

She recited the spell she'd written in her head a few times to be sure she remembered every word, although she knew that wouldn't be a problem. It was just an excuse to calm her nerves. While she didn't believe in the legends involving the black cougars, she did know first hand how powerful they could be. Being called agents of death for centuries tended to keep people in line whether they could back it up or not. They were glorified killers, plain and simple. Innocent or not didn't matter when it came to their victims. If the council ordered a kill, they killed.

She looked over at the bowl holding the necessary ingredients to work the spell, and the picture of her beloved mother propped behind it. A glance in the mirror and she saw the spitting image of her. The same raven black hair that always fell in her eyes, the dimpled chin she used to poke at when she was a child, and the high cheek bones men called striking in her mother. She still missed her every single day.

A slight creak of the railing outside her door alerted her to a presence. She jumped into place and quickly willed everything but him from her mind as she inhaled a slow, deep breath. Showtime.

The door nudged open inch by inch as he moved slowly forward. She stood in the corner across the room, so he wouldn't be able to see her until he actually stepped inside. She sucked in a deep breath and held it as he approached.

One black-booted foot entered a few seconds before he peered around the door. When he didn't see her he pushed inside a little bit more and took the final step into the room she needed. Without hesitation she started the chant. Quietly at first.

*When in the circle that is mine  
Safety' gone and evil roams  
Hold this being from within  
So heed this call.*

She whispered the words again and again, stronger each time until her voice was loud and clear and Kane stood in the doorway staring at her.

“What have you done?”

She glanced down at his feet and stared. He followed her gaze and a stream of curses flew from his mouth as he realized he’d stepped right into her circle and she’d just bound him to it.

“You bitch.”

Her lips spread into a grin she hoped was as wicked as she felt. “Don’t try foreplay with me, you’ll find yourself neutered faster than you can say that word again.”

“You can’t hold me here.”

His arrogance wiped the smile from her face as her brow arched in his direction. “Hmm, let’s see. You’re stuck there and I’m roaming free. In my book that means I do whatever the hell I want and you can’t do a thing about it.”

A low snarl sounded from his throat as sharp canines peeked from beneath a curled lip. “What do you want then? A chance to beg for your life?”

It would be a cold day in hell before she begged for anything from him, but she thought about his other question. What did she want? Just him dead, right? She looked at him, really looked at him. It had been weeks since she’d seen him last, and unfortunately he looked even better than she remembered. His spiked, short hair had grown out since then and it was messier and in need of a comb, or maybe her fingers running through it.

His eyes, glaring at her, were dark, like coal in anger. She stood too far away to make out the flecks of gold she’d seen before. The grim line of his lips against the square, firm jaw made her want to laugh out loud. He was damned irresistible right now. It wasn’t right for him to look so—so sinful. He made her think of sex. Sex on the floor, sex on the wall, sex damn near any which way she could get it.

She let out a slow, unsteady breath. She had to stop thinking about him like that; the time for fun was long gone.

“I’m tired of playing with you, cat. It’s time to end this.”

“What exactly is this?” His hands gestured around them. “You’re a criminal, Lara. One who now has a death sentence against her.”

“I’m not the one who deserves to die.” Her anger fired hot and she practically spat at him. “You and yours are the only criminals as far as I’m concerned. You’re just afraid for someone to finally expose you for what you really are.” She turned away from him. What she felt when she looked

at him and what she knew were at odds, and it drove her crazy. Nerve endings sizzled as desire warred with the facts her brain wouldn't let her forget.

"You aren't making any sense. Make me understand what this is all about."

She whirled back around and stalked across the room, careful not to get too close to the circle, which could weaken.

"Tell me something, Kane. Before you kill, do you even take the time to learn something about your victim?"

"What the hell kind of question is that? I don't take lives because I enjoy it. I do it because it has to be done, it's a duty—a job. Without order and rules our secrets can't be maintained. And then people like you start hunting us, wanting to kill all of us because of fear of the unknown. We aren't evil, you know. Hell, I'm standing in a spell you created with black magic, talk about evil. You of all people should understand different. So what exactly is your damage?"

"My damage?" She wanted to reach through the barrier holding him and slap the crap out of him, maybe knock some sense into that pretty boy head of his. What had she been thinking? "How can you be sure you aren't killing the innocent? Do you ever question the validity and integrity of your precious council?"

"Why should I? Every case is presented and voted on by unbiased members of our clan. It's their duty to ensure everyone a fair trial and our system has worked well for a very long time."

"Like with me?" His blind faith burned in her gut worse than a wicked case of indigestion that wouldn't go away no matter how many antacids you popped.

"I witnessed your treachery with my own eyes. The evidence is cut and dry." His voice had lowered, and if she didn't know better she could have sworn she detected a thread of sadness. In fact, now that she thought about it, he didn't seem all that angry about being trapped. Did he not believe she would really kill him? Would she?

"You're nothing but a liar. An animal that wouldn't see the truth if it bit him on the ass." Power flared through her as the edge of her control frayed.

"That's right, honey. I'm an animal and right now I can smell just how full of shit you are. You think you can hide your wet little pussy from me? That I can't sense arousal?"

Lara ground her teeth at his gall. He was baiting her, messing with her head while he came up with a plan, or until she made a mistake and did something stupid. Neither of which would happen.



She'd lived for years making these plans with not a shred of doubt, until she'd run into Kane. She met his gaze, searching for a sign of what she didn't know. Tension filled the room as they both realized this discussion had nowhere to go. Neither believed in the other. Problem for her was she'd suffered doubts and did her best to overcome them. Now, with him here, her need to kill him had eroded and been replaced with something else. Something softer.

She broke the showdown, unable to stay focused when he looked at her with equal parts—*I'm going to kill you, I'm going to fuck you.* Instead she watched the serene slash of his lips. He didn't smile at her, but he quit frowning. Always the level-headed brother, able to take things in stride and move on, or so she'd heard repeatedly.

She imagined those full lips of his would be soft and patient when they pressed up against her skin. That image made her nipples tighten against her t-shirt, and she prayed he wouldn't notice. He already knew too much. When her thoughts strayed to his neck and chest, the spots she wanted to lick the most, she thought she heard a noise not unlike a purr. A low rumble, so quiet she wondered if she was mistaken.

She had to be. He had hunted her. He wanted—

“Don't look at me like that. It's not safe.”

“Like—like what?” Something had gone all wrong. Now that he was here, she felt her control slipping fast.

Another rattling sound came from his chest, louder than before. *Damn, he really is purring.* Goosebumps rose along her flesh and a shiver trembled down the length of her body before she could stop it.

“Like you want to eat me more than kill me.” He whispered the words so low she leaned in closer to hear them.

His hand shot out and circled her waist, dragging her body against his. Her shock of utter surprise disappeared when he slanted his mouth over hers, swallowing her cries and taking advantage of her gasp to plunge his tongue past her lips and taste and devour every inch of her.

Sensations exploded throughout her, including a hunger firing through her veins. He tasted so damn good. Warmth and spice flooded her as she struggled to comprehend what had happened. Hot hands roamed and clutched at her back and burned straight through to her skin. Arousal grabbed her body and fought for control. Moisture leaked onto her panties as common sense fled at the thought of him finally taking her like she'd dreamt. She had to have him.

His raw kiss deepened and her hands pressed against his chest. The hard wall of muscle flexed underneath her fingers and she fought the unusual instinct to rip his clothes to shreds.

*No. No. No.*

They couldn't do this. It was beyond wrong. She pushed against him, desperate now to force him away, but he didn't budge even an inch. Instead his next purr rumbled straight through her belly to her clit; arousal beat a harsh rhythm in her system with nowhere to go. She pushed him again, harder, and this time he stumbled back, slamming into the wall. Something primal took over, an urge so basic she flung herself against him and kissed him back with lips, teeth, and tongue while her hands frantically clawed for skin. She connected with bare arms covered by a soft thin layer of hair that tickled as she stroked his bicep.

She struggled not to moan as she once again fought for control. This had to stop before she did something crazy, like beg him to fuck her right here against the wall. She tried to pull from his embrace but he only tightened his arms around her. When she was certain he wasn't going to just let go she did the only thing she could to bring them to their senses. She bit down on him with sharp and precise pressure, drawing blood along his tongue.

He reared back and away, releasing her long enough for her to move away from him. "What the fuck?" His voice sounded funny as she imagined his tongue would be swelling already.

She licked the few drops of blood she'd drawn and savored the rich, dark flavor. She might have gotten his attention, but she was still lost in a haze. She wanted to jump him right now, and it wasn't so she could kill him.

"Why the hell did you do that?" His loud, angry words penetrated her thoughts as she stared him down and considered her options. Her muscles twitched and burned while fighting the instinct to go to him. Her brain tried to process what options she had now, but in the end she kept circling back to how much trouble she was in.

"How the hell did you do it?"

"What? Break your circle?" The mocking tone of his questions grated on her nerves. "Did you really think it would be that easy? That I would just show up here and not be prepared?" When she said nothing he continued, "You have far too little faith in my abilities, sweetheart."

"I'm not your sweetheart." She'd meant to yell at him, but instead her voice betrayed her with a husky whisper.

"No, I guess in a literal sense that term doesn't apply to you one bit now, does it?" Somehow when he insulted her in that southern drawl of his it almost didn't sound too bad. Almost.

"But you were in the circle, and I know shapeshifters are not immune to the binding. I can still feel the power."

“Easy, I saw the circle coming in the door and I broke it.”

Oohh, she wanted to smack the smirk off his face so bad. She thought to walk away, to get farther away from him, but she couldn't—she pulled back her arm and plowed her fist into his face with the full force of her body behind it. Pain exploded in her hand at the same time his head swung to the side from the punch. Spittle and blood flew from his mouth where she must have busted his lip. Adrenalin rushed through her now as she sprang back several feet with her fists up in front of her. Ready.

His hand came up and touched his lip as he swiveled to look at her. The anger nearly glowed from his gaze. He glanced at the blood on his fingers before slowly licking them clean.

“You’ve got nowhere to go, baby, you’re trapped.”

Based on where she’d retreated, her options were limited. His big body blocked her path to the doorway and there were no windows on her side of the room. Her only choices were to fight her way through or give up. The kind of magic she wielded took time to prepare and he would have her trapped and maybe dead before she could even raise a breeze.

“So, what now? Fuck me and kill me or just kill me?”

“That was the plan.” He didn’t specify which one and she damn well didn’t want to know as either one involved her death. Something she wasn’t about to take lying down.

## *Chapter Three*

Kane watched her fidget nervously. His patience had worn thin as she'd tried to toy with him. But damn, when he touched her his body lit up like a Christmas tree on overload, and every instinctive fiber in him had screamed to take her. If she hadn't bitten him when she did, there was no telling where they'd be. He rolled his tongue against the roof of his mouth, gently stroking the spot she'd hurt. Funny, if he didn't know better he'd swear she had some feline in her. She sure fought like one. Not to mention he'd about come in his jeans when she'd licked his blood from her lips.

She made him want to stand back and study her. While average in height and weight by human female standards, she was downright petite in his arms. What would it be like to watch her small, soft hands roam her naked flesh? Maybe rub and pinch her nipples a few times before traveling down her torso to her slick, hot pussy just dying to be touched. Yes, she was wet and aroused even more now because her scent had gone from a subtle waft to filling every inch of the room, further driving him mad.

He shifted his legs and willed his dick to go down because so help him, if she glanced one more time at his crotch they were done. Distracted by his thoughts, he almost didn't catch her making a move until it was too late. Fortunately, he threw an arm out and grabbed her by the foot she'd been about to nail him with, flipping her backwards towards the bathroom. Her head missed the wall by inches but she caught herself on her hands before she smashed into the floor.

"Good reflexes." Really good.

"Whatever," she spat.

She sprang from her crouched position in one smooth and very fast leap, and her body attached itself to his as she hauled him to the ground. The air whooshed out of his lungs at the force of her weight on top of him when they slammed against the unforgiving wooden floor. For a split second her pussy nestled over his metal stiff erection and neither of them breathed.

When he bucked his hips against hers to knock her off of him, her eyes widened to huge saucers but she held on like a tough bronc. He managed to wrap one of his legs around hers and flip them over until his

weight crushed her. Under his bruising pressure she bucked wildly, trying to get out from underneath but he held fast, not allowing her escape.

“It’s like fighting fire with fire, Lara. All you’re doing is making my dick harder.”

“Oh, you bastard, get off of me.” Her skin glowed with the heat and color of her anger as well as good old-fashioned sweat from fighting him so hard.

“You started it, remember? If I let you go are you going to calm down?”

“Are you going to kill me?” Her breath came in short pants as her chest heaved from her efforts.

He didn’t answer. What could he say? The council had given him an execution order for her, which left him with no choice. Kane rolled over to lie beside her, frustration rolling off both of them in heated waves. He pushed his fingers through the scant few inches of hair he had and covered his face.

“Why shouldn’t I? You tried to kill my brother multiple times.”

“C’mon, Kane, give me a break. Your own *brother* tried to kill your brother multiple times. Do you have to kill him, too?”

She knew he didn’t, he could tell from the sarcasm in her voice. The council had already decided that Malcolm had suffered extenuating circumstances that made him behave out of character. His sentence had been another long period banishment.

“Give me something. Anything. Give me a reason why I shouldn’t.”

“You killed my mother.”

Her words hammered through him. She couldn’t have shocked him more if she’d pulled out a shotgun and put a hole in his gut. He sat up and stared at her, searching for a sign she was playing him or just stalling again. But, the naked honesty vivid on her face rattled him, and there wasn’t a trace of deceit coming from her scent. She wasn’t lying.

“That’s absurd.” The pain in her eyes doubled at his words, forcing him to turn away from them. Something was very wrong here. His gut had told him weeks ago there was more to this story so now it was time to find out exactly what he was missing. More than ever, before he found it damned difficult to figure out who the good guys and the bad guys were.

“It’s true.” Her simple statement cracked at the shield around his heart.

“No. It’s impossible, Lara. I have never killed a female. Nor have I ever been asked to until you.”

Tears welled in her eyes that she quickly brushed away. “A black cougar murdered my mother. So, if not you, then one of yours. To me it’s

all the same. You kill who you are told to without question and this time you made a big mistake. Vengeance will be mine, one way or another.”

Kane sighed. He needed her calm and rational, not acting on impulse if they were going to get to the bottom of this. He stepped in front of her and held out his hand. “I think it’s time for us to have a long talk, don’t you? I get the feeling there’s more going on here than either of us is ready for, the least we could do is help each other understand.”

She hesitated, staring back at him for a few unsure minutes before she finally broke eye contact, reached for his hand, and allowed him to pull her to a standing position just inches in front of him. This close, she refused to meet his eyes, and instead he only saw the top of her head. She stood the perfect height to tuck into his shoulder and hold close. With this view the silky black fall of her hair beckoned him still, despite the damage she had inflicted on him. Good thing he healed faster than a normal man, or he might have felt more of an urge to make her pay. He bit back a smile at the thought. He doubted she was ready for that. He’d rattled her enough with just a kiss.

“Are you offering a truce?” She looked up at him then, and the cool green depths of her eyes betrayed the wariness within. Lara didn’t trust him at all, and who could blame her, as he didn’t trust her one bit, either.

“Temporarily, yes.” He held up his hand between them and she cautiously took it, offering a brief shake of a deal. “Good, now that we have that settled, do you mind if I get cleaned up?” He pointed to his busted lip. “I think I could use some ice. Can I trust you to stay here while I get some? I mean, if you run again now we’ll be right back where we started, and I don’t think there will be a second truce between—”

“Stop now, Kane, while you’re ahead. I agreed to a truce and I’m not going anywhere for the moment, but if you keep running your mouth, I’ll be damn tempted to shut it again.”

“Ouch, point taken, my little hell cat.” He walked toward the door laughing, amazed at her ability to get all worked up over just a few choice words. Under different circumstances she would sure be a lot of fun.

\* \* \* \*

When he returned with his ice he decided to get comfortable before they started. She still fidgeted around the room and he wanted to give her some time to settle down a bit, otherwise this was going to take all night. Kane removed his boots and padded over to the sink to prepare an ice pack. Grabbing one of the small towels from the rack, he filled it with ice. As he worked he noticed the worn picture behind a bowl. Why did Lara

carry a picture of herself? He leaned closer for a better look and stared into the eyes of a different woman. Blue, not green, and filled with a resigned sadness unlike the heat he'd seen in Lara. This had to be the mother, and judging from the frayed edges and wrinkles, he'd guess she carried her close. That kind of family tie he understood all too well.

He gently placed the cloth against his mouth and ambled over to recline in the chair in the corner, keeping an eye on her the whole time. She sat on the opposite side of the bed, giving them a little space apart, which was probably a good thing at this point. Not only did he not want to be tempted, but he didn't need any more bruises.

"Tell me about your mother." He wanted to get straight to the heart of the matter, but he wasn't heartless like she believed, and he could see her demeanor had changed. She needed to do this for herself at her own pace.

"My mother was a witch, but so much more than that. She didn't practice black magic and actually used her power very little. I think she was afraid of it; at least, that's what I thought back then. Now I'm not so sure." On a deep breath she continued in a clear and steady voice. "I was a teenager when she was killed, and as you can imagine we argued a lot. She did her best to keep me in line and tried to impress upon me how important it was to respect the magic. I learned a lot from her, but back then I never listened to her warnings and definitely didn't appreciate her knowledge."

Kane tried to imagine Lara as a teen and pictured a rebellious girl who must have been hell on wheels. Her father probably needed a shotgun or two. "What about your father?"

"I don't know who my father is, she would never tell me. She always made up excuses about how she couldn't yet face the story, but I could tell she was lying. The darkness clouding her eyes every time I asked was a dead giveaway. We fought about that a lot, too."

"When did your mother die?" Best to establish a timeline now.

"She didn't just die, so don't try to whitewash what happened to her. She was murdered when I was fourteen." Lara stood then, moving to the far corner of the room as if she needed to put more distance between them. "After her death, I had no one and I was afraid and lived in fear of being next. I didn't understand anything so I ran."

Kane noticed her reflection in the mirror on the back wall of the room. There were no tears, but the anguish was clearly written on her face. Instinctively he wanted to comfort her but knew he couldn't.

"How can you be sure it was a black cougar? There aren't many you know and we don't kill indiscriminately."



She turned to him, her pain turning to rage in the blink of an eye. “Do not go there with me, Kane! Over the years I have learned all I need to know about your archaic justice system. It’s your turn to face the truth that there is a serious flaw when an innocent woman is killed!”

He absorbed her anger as well as the pain she delivered with every word. She still smelled of the truth, and he would know. But her truth could be different from reality. She had been a child, although arguing the point with her right now seemed futile. He took a cautious step toward her and she held up her arms to stop him.

“No.” She didn’t say anything else, she didn’t have to.

He wanted to push her for more, but his gut warned him now was not the time. If her mother was killed when she was fourteen that had to be what, twelve or thirteen years ago? He’d been too young anyways, so that left either Lucas or his father as the executioner. Already he had an uneasy feeling about the whole situation. Her crimes had seemed so clear cut, even Malcolm had kept silent about her motivation. That’s because if what she said was true then she had the right of...

“Are you familiar with our laws in this situation?”

“What do you mean?” She looked up curiously.

“If your mother was wrongfully killed by our clan—and I’m not saying she was—you would have rights as her heir.”

“What kind of rights?”

“Let’s not go there yet. I still have a duty to my clan, but I am willing to admit something doesn’t smell right in this whole freaking mess. It’s time to make a call.”

“No, you can’t—” She moved then, faster than he’d expected to position herself in front of the door.

“I have people I trust, Lara, someone who will seek the information that I need. Now you will have to trust me.” Kane stood and took the two strides to get to her, stopping within reach.

“I’d be a fool to trust you.” The words were sarcastic, but the delivery only sounded tired. She was more vulnerable than she knew and his cat wanted that part of her. Stripping the pain and anger away to reveal the woman underneath would give him incredible pleasure. She’d fight him every step of the way, but he suspected it would be worth every bruise and bite.

“Knowing you, if I pull something I’m confident you’ll find a way to make me pay.” The animal knew what it wanted, but the man still wasn’t convinced. This could all be a ruse. The retribution for playing him would be swift and deadly. Something they both needed to remember.

He brushed past her and walked out. She needed some time to think about what he said and he had some inquiries to make. For her sake as well as his, he wanted to get to the truth of this mess and no one would die until they did. Opting for privacy, he stepped outside into the shadowed area underneath the stairs.

He dug his cell phone out of his front pocket and dialed a quick three-number combination. He didn't hesitate for even a moment to consider who to call; he knew who would help him.

The phone was answered on the first ring. "Speak."

"It's me. I need some help."

A bark of laughter sounded in his ear. "Don't tell me she slipped away from you again."

"No, it's a little more complicated than that." The door behind him swung open and Lara breezed past him. Her audacity made him smile. She definitely would keep him on his toes, that was for sure.

He covered the phone. "Where are you going?"

She turned back to face him. "Don't get your panties in a twist, I'm not running." She gave him a slight grin and his body instantly came to life. He liked when she gave him some of her saucy attitude. He let loose on a low growl, forgetting the phone for a second. "I'm going to get us some food, cat boy. I think we're going to need our strength."

Damn, he was in so much trouble with this one.

He put his phone back against his ear to howling laughter that even a snarl didn't halt.

## *Chapter Four*

Lara hopped into her beloved classic Impala, the one tangible thing she'd refused to give up, and turned over the engine. She glanced in the rearview mirror but didn't see Kane anywhere. Didn't matter, she knew with every fiber of her being he watched her, waiting for her to run. Every time he looked at her with those hungry eyes she felt the impact everywhere. Her stomach quivered, her nipples tightened, and her pussy squeezed with a desire that baffled her.

She had her suspicions about his ultimate intentions at this point, but she'd agreed to a truce so she would abide by it for now. She doubted the circumstances between them would change, but if it bought her some time to figure out a Plan B, she'd take it. And boy, did she need a new plan and pronto.

The more time she spent with him the less she thought about revenge, and the more she thought about hot, naked sex. She had to force images of them flesh to flesh from her mind and pay attention to the road.

A few miles from the motel she found a small diner that looked promising. It better, considering it was the only option anywhere in the tiny town. Inside, she ignored the blatant staring as she moved through the dining area to the counter. The woman at the register gave her a hard once over that made Lara want to laugh. Guess they saw a stranger coming a mile away around here.

"Can I help you?" The tone wasn't exactly friendly, but friends she didn't need.

"Just some take out, please." The woman handed her a menu and Lara studied the options. She hadn't even thought to ask Kane what he might want to eat, but considering he was at the top of the food chain in these here parts he'd probably not have an issue with any kind of meat. Which was good, 'cause she craved a big juicy burger right now and the protein would keep her strong.

After handing over her limited cash, she gathered the large bags of food and headed out, trying not to look around. The last thing she wanted were questions or worse a confrontation. When she stepped outside and turned in the direction of her car she stopped short. Kane stood leaning

casually against the emerald green metal of the hood, waiting for her. The shades riding the bridge of his nose hid his eyes from the rising sun and those, along with the stubble on his face, gave him that dark and dangerous look she found so appealing. Even the leather pack he carried seemed sexy. But, it was the tight t-shirt and jeans that got her. The way the denim hugged his thighs and cupped his...it should be illegal for him to look so good propped against her baby.

“What? You didn’t trust me to get food?”

He smiled at her, revealing white teeth, minus the canines of course, edging up the bad boy look that made her already hard nipples tighten more.

“I thought you might need some help.” He pushed off of his perch and moved toward her.

“Uh huh. So much for the trust and truce we agreed upon.” Not that she really blamed him. In his situation she wouldn’t have let him leave her sight, either. She fished in the pocket of her pants for her keys, determined to not be affected.

“Well then, maybe I just missed you.”

Lara hitched a step at the dazzling smile he threw in with that delivery. “No, now you’re just full of shit,” She laughed. She tossed the bags of food at him as she brushed past him for the driver’s side and climbed in.

“Sweet ride you’ve got here.”

“I’m rather fond of her. She takes good care of me.” Damn, open mouth insert foot. Lara started the engine and it purred to life. She would never tire of the smooth hum of that sound.

“I’ll bet she does.” He relaxed back against the soft leather seats and quieted down. She glanced around the lot for his truck but it wasn’t there. He must have shifted and ran to catch up with her.

“Have a nice run?”

“Actually I did. It’s always good to stretch my legs early in the morning. Gets the heart rate up and the blood pumping. Relieves the stress.” His hands stroked down his thighs, smoothing the denim as he stretched his long, long legs as much as he could inside the car.

She forced her gaze away and squirmed in her seat all over again. Her pussy tingled from arousal and she knew she’d be wet and ready. She had a good grasp on the idea of having an itch that needed to be scratched, but jeez.

*Come on, Lara, think about something else. Uhm. It doesn’t look like it’ll rain today. The guy who had checked me in yesterday had been a total sleaze ball, leering every chance he got. Yeah, that worked.*

Back under a little control, she pulled smoothly into the motel parking lot and killed the engine. "So what's the plan?"

"Well, I'm going to eat whatever you have in these bags, 'cause it smells damn good."

"Smart ass." She couldn't resist poking at him.

"Anyone ever tell you how mean you are?"

"Who me?" She tried to fake a sweet innocent smile and ended up biting her lip to keep from bursting into laughter.

"Nice try, babe."

"If someone told you I was nice, then you have been badly misinformed." She wrenched open the car door and slammed it a little bit harder than necessary. The heavy door of her old car boomed loudly behind her.

Kane rushed from the car and moved toward her. "All right, all right. I called a friend of mine who can get some information for me. When I hear back from him I'll make a decision about what to do."

She turned and cocked her brow at him. "You will decide? What is this, the 1950s? Never mind, I'm going to assume you meant to say *we* will decide."

"Yeah yeah, semantics."

She unlocked the motel room and swept the room for any signs of disturbance. Habit made her cautious and she didn't like being caught unaware. She headed to the bathroom to wash up and left Kane to take care of the food. He must have some thoughts on what their options were, although she couldn't imagine what they would be. If she ran he'd come after her and her she would spend her life in hiding. Secluded and alone. Not exactly the plan she had for herself. Or, she could go back to her original plan and kill the black cougars. If she took care of all three of them then the clan would be left in a shambles. Her revenge would be completed and she could finally move on with her life.

She paused and looked at herself in the mirror. From the dark smudges under her eyes to the weight she'd lost lately, she looked tired. What exactly would she do with the rest of her life? Settle down somewhere, find a husband and have kids? She shuddered at the thought. She'd spent her whole life so far saving up for this day without taking time to consider what she'd do after. Lara shrugged her shoulders. No matter, she had plenty of time to make plans afterwards. If she survived.

When she returned to the room she stopped outside the bathroom door and watched Kane. He sat at the little table, his big body dominating the space. Even his legs stretched far beyond the edges of the furniture. She

watched in fascination as he devoured one of the steak dinners like a man possessed without even noticing she'd returned.

"I take it you were hungry." Her statement startled him and his head jerked swiftly around, a hunk of meat halfway to his mouth.

"It's been a while since I've had a meal this good. That's the charm of a small town like this. Great home cooking."

"I guess a growing boy needs his nourishment." He snarled at the word *boy*. *So typical*. She took the seat across from him and opened up one of the hamburger meals and doctored it up with condiments. "You don't cook?"

"Not as often as I'd like to, but out on the road it's been one fast food hell after another." He clamped his lips shut when he realized what he'd said. Meaning, he'd been hunting her. Her guard slammed back into place as she reminded herself he was someone who could not be trusted.

"I hope telling them to make the steaks medium rare was to your liking."

"It's perfect."

"Probably more cooked than you're used to, huh?"

He set his fork down and scowled at her. "I'm not a beast, you know. I'd like to think I have the best qualities of both species. And eighty percent of my time is spent just like any other human male. Maybe you should bother to get to know me before you accuse me of any more heinous crimes."

"That's a little like the pot calling the kettle black, don't you think?"

His face flushed an angry red as his gaze turned hard and cold. "Maybe we should change the subject for now."

"Maybe so." They finished their meal in silence and cleaned up the table. Now what the hell were they going to do? It was just the two of them in a small fifteen by fifteen space with a huge bed sitting in the middle. She couldn't stop herself as she gazed at the king-sized elephant in the room. She needed to get out of here before either one of them did something they'd regret. He had her running hot and then cold from one minute to the next, driving her crazy.

"You don't want to be in here with me, do you?" he asked.

She should have known he'd know exactly what she was thinking about. Fear was probably written all over her face. Not to mention she was damned horny, and a fucking cougar had sharpened senses including that annoying heightened sense of smell he enjoyed reminding her of. He would know. She shook her head, afraid to look at him.

"Let's go for a walk, get back outside for a while. I think we could both use some fresh air and perspective."

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, they were headed back to the motel and even tenser than when they started. At least he was. Kane had walked behind her much of the time, and simply watching her fine ass wrapped in snug denim had kept his dick harder than he could stand it. Her scent wafted back to him on the slightest breeze and her arousal had only increased with the exercise.

Did she have any idea how difficult it was to walk when you had to adjust your cock every few minutes to find a place where it wouldn't press up against the rough denim? Would she care? Not likely, he imagined.

When they emerged from the woods not far from the motel, his cell phone vibrated against his ass. He stopped and dug it out of his pocket and flipped it open to find a text urging him to call as soon as possible. There were four other similar messages as well. They must have gotten out of cell range at some point while hiking.

When she turned to say something he waved his phone at her to let her know he needed to make a call. He watched her enter the room and waited until she closed the door behind her before he dialed the familiar number.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"Out of cell range, I guess. I just got your messages." Kane shoved his hand in his pocket and leaned against the concrete wall.

"I hope you two aren't doing anything stupid." Annoyance buzzed from his friend's tone.

"Hardly."

"Good. I suggest you keep it that way."

"Stop giving me shit and get to the point, dickhead." He wanted to get inside that room.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I checked around and I don't know, Kane, she might be right. There's very little information available about her mother."

Damn. This was not what he had expected to hear.

"Who killed her?" His breath stilled as he waited for the answer.

"Don't know. Can't find the order."

"That's impossible."

"Yeah, that's what I thought, too. There's only two options here, Kane. Either do what you've been sent to do or bring her in. You have that power. Although, I can tell you right now that's not going to go over well at all. Damn council hates being questioned."



"I'm not going to kill her if I don't know for certain." Not sure I could have in the first place.

"It's your head, dude. You ready for that?"

"Doesn't look like I have much of a choice." He remembered the flash of sadness he'd seen in her eyes. The one look he suspected held the truth.

"I'm just glad it's you and not me. Gonna be a shit storm when you bring her in."

Despite the seriousness of his dilemma, Kane smiled. He always did have a way of finding humor in any situation. "You have such a way with words."

"Ain't my words you should be worrying about, Kane. What does she think about all this, anyways? She looking forward to walking into the enemy camp?"

"I haven't told her yet."

Laughter erupted over the line, annoying the hell out of him. He already knew she would tell him where to shove his plan. He closed the phone and rested his head against the side of the building. He really didn't want to take her in against her will, it would make it more difficult all around, for her and for him.

However, he'd do what he had to do. He owed that much to his brother, Lucas. Mixed feelings aside, Lara had tried to kill both him and his mate multiple times. They had to get to the bottom of this. He shoved the phone back in his pocket and headed inside. Best to get this over with as soon as possible, like ripping a Band-Aid.

He expected her to be waiting impatiently for him when he went in, but what he found was far different and nothing he'd prepared for. The room was warm and humid from a shower and she was sprawled out on the bed in a tiny t-shirt and short shorts.

*Oh, hell.*

Skin. That's all he saw. Bare, smooth flesh ready to be touched, licked even. Oh, yeah. He wanted to start at her cute little toes and tongue every square inch of flesh he could until she squirmed and writhed from the onslaught. His body sprang to life as yet another erection pushed to be free. His body said he should be inside her right now, sinking his cock into the warm heat he knew waited for him. She could deny it all she wanted, but he knew the truth and so did she.

He made quick work of removing his boots and socks, then peeled the offending denim from his legs. He couldn't stand the clothing rubbing against him for another second. Standing in nothing but his boxer briefs, he paused to consider whether or not he could get away with being in bed

with her completely naked. Reluctantly he opted for restraint. She was already going to be pissed at him, why compound it with nudity?

He stretched out next to her, sure to keep some distance between them. It had been a long, stressful day for them. This wacky sexual attraction thing they had going on was like a tight string between them, threatening to snap at any moment and cause them both a whole hell of a lot of problems.

Laying this close to her, he smelled the sweet scent of vanilla from the soap she'd showered with—he was a man with a sweet tooth. He groaned and turned his head away; maybe he should go for another walk, alone, for a while. Get her out of his head.

*Yeah, like that's possible.*

"What's wrong, Kane?" Her voice sounded soft and sleepy. The sexiest damn thing he'd ever heard in his life. She definitely didn't sound mad.

"Nothing, sweetheart, go back to sleep."

She shifted and rolled onto her side, which left him looking at her backside. With a groan he turned and stared at the ceiling, desperate for a distraction. Anything but the curve of her supple back and indented waist that led to a fine round ass anyone would have a hard time resisting.

She moved again, burrowing closer and groped for the covers.

"Are you cold?"

"Yes, a little."

He pulled the blanket over them both and wrapped the fabric around her waist, his fingers brushing the soft skin of her leg. She sighed in appreciation, a sexy sound no man on earth could resist. Kane worked his hand underneath her shirt and touched the heated flesh of her waist. He spread his fingers in the curve there, thinking how well she would fit him. He continued a path to her stomach where he swirled around her belly button. For a split second her body tensed before relaxing once again in his hand.

He touched her ribs and hesitated at the point he'd expected to touch her bra. She didn't have one on. He stilled his fingers, willing them not move, but the knowledge that everything he'd dreamt of for weeks was right here in his grasp was too heady an enticement. He couldn't have stopped now unless she told him to, and even that was questionable. Based on the subtle increase in her breathing and shift in her scent, however, she wouldn't stop him.

He moved forward and traced the under curve of her breast. Around and under he continued, but purposely not touching her more sensitive

spots. He smiled when she quietly sucked in a breath and held it. She wanted him to keep going.

“We can’t,” she murmured.

“Don’t think, Lara, just feel. Unless, you really don’t want me, and if that’s the case then you need to tell me now.”

She didn’t say anything else, she didn’t need to. She covered his hand with her much smaller one and pulled it to cover her breast, scraping against the ice hard nipple.

He groaned at the exquisite feel and roughly flipped her onto her back so he could get better access. Her hair fanned out around her head, and her skin seemed to glow in the dim light of the room. This was everything he’d dreamed about when his conscious self shut down. Underneath the evil he’d perceived in this woman was a softer, sweeter side he craved.

“What do you want, Lara?” Without waiting for her answer he shoved her shirt up and out of the way and got his first look at the lush, full breasts topped by the tightest little nipples he’d ever seen. He dipped down to nip at one and then the other, licking and biting as he went.

Her eyes popped open and caught his gaze, and for a moment he saw an unguarded lust that took his breath away. Hunger met hunger like never before. His tongue traveled between her breasts and up her neck, pausing at the little hollow in the center for a few extra nibbles and licks. Lara’s body shivered beneath him and the scent of her arousal flooded the room. His nostrils flared as he inhaled deeply, letting her fill his lungs. When her shirt got in his way, he lifted it over her head, stretching her arms, and tossed it to the ground. His gut clenched at the scene she presented. He loved the look of her with arms held up and looking a little helpless.

Kane opted to keep them there by grasping her wrists together with one of his hands. “Damn, that’s hot, babe.” She started to speak, but he kissed her quiet. He didn’t want her to say anything that would distract from his plan. Her honeyed taste drove him so wild he was sure it would be addictive. With a low growl he slid his lips further along hers, tangling with her tongue until they both broke apart gasping for breath.

“You’re mine now.” Kane slid his hands down her smooth torso to the edge of her shorts. He wanted her naked and underneath him right now, no more games. With a quick twist of his fingers, he had her jeans unbuttoned and the zipper edged down as well. His breath caught in his lungs when he spied the tiny tuft of silky black hair that covered her mound. A rumbling in his throat sounded again. Damn woman got his motor running, that was for sure. He couldn’t remember feeling this out of control with another female.

His fingers moved through the soft thatch and her moist, silken folds, circling her clit but not quite touching it.

Her gasp caught his attention and he turned to look at her face to see her expression. Her eyes closed tight and her mouth formed a sweet little circle, giving him all kinds of devilish thoughts of taking her there. His hardening cock pulsed against his leg as he imagined sliding it between those luscious lips. Fuck, he was going to die if he didn't have her soon.

Drawn magnetically back to her sex, he dipped a finger inside, reveling in the tight sheath heating him as he stroked the soft skin of her pussy. He grazed her clit with his thumb and she jumped enough that he thought she was going to fly off the bed. He loved how responsive and eager she'd become.

He worked a second finger inside, getting her ready, 'cause damn, she was tight. Again her skin beckoned to him and his beast fought for control. His canines lengthened on a sudden urge to bite and mark her. Careful not to hurt her, he touched the razor sharp points to her flat stomach and scraped lightly around her belly button. She groaned and bucked, close to an orgasm if her ragged breathing and little cries indicated anything.

She cried out, "Oh, Kane. So close."

A loud pounding sounded at their door and Kane and Lara both leapt instinctively away from each other, springing off the bed on each side. Adrenalin surged, leaving him alert and ready for whatever was happening.

"Open up."

## Chapter Five

Lara's heart raced as she fixed her shorts and hopped around, looking for her shirt. Crap, what the hell had she been thinking? The banging on the door continued and Kane motioned for her to go into the bathroom. She pulled her shirt back on and shook her head. No way in hell would she cower in the other room waiting for someone else to protect her.

"Like fucking hell. Why don't *you* go wait in the bathroom and let me take care of it?" she whispered.

He arched his eyebrows. "That wasn't a question."

She moved swiftly around the bed and pushed her face inches from his. "Don't even go there. This is my room and no one else knows you're here. You are going to stay out of sight until I see what is going on."

"I'm not going in there, either," he stated sullenly.

"Fine. Then get behind the door and let me handle this." She walked away from him; they'd have this out later. She attached the wall chain to the door and opened it a few inches.

"You can stop banging anytime now."

Two hulking men stood outside her door dressed in black jeans, black t-shirts, and black boots—she knew right away what they were even if she didn't know exactly who.

*More fucking cats.*

"Ma'am, where is he?"

"Ma'am?" She rolled her eyes. "Where is who?"

"We're here for you and Kane."

That took her back. What had Kane done when he'd made his phone calls? Called in reinforcements?

"What's going on?" Kane had come around the door and questioned the men. "Dave, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Friends of yours?" She looked at him waiting for an explanation.

"We've come to help you bring her in." Dave looked down at Kane's state of undress and arched his brow.

"Since when do I fucking need help?"

“Whoa, wait a minute. Bring me in? Kane, what the hell is he talking about?” She should have killed him when she had the chance. God, and she’d let him touch her.

Kane snarled. “You guys wait outside I’ll be with you in a minute.”

The men took a few steps back and Lara sensed their fear. She should have made more magic.

“I was going to tell you when I came in, but you were already napping.”

“God, where have I heard that before?” She shook her head and paced across the room. “I don’t know what you’re planning, but I ain’t going nowhere with you. Especially now.”

Why the hell had she listened to him? She fucking knew better. Since when did she let a hot body control her? *Ugh*. Now she was trapped in a tiny motel room with three cats watching her every move. *Damn. Damn. Damn.*

“We have to go back. If we don’t then I am expected to carry out my orders.” His voice lowered. “I heard you out and I’m taking a huge risk on you, now you need to do the same for me.”

“I should have listened to my instincts.”

“What? And kill me? Is that what you still want? Look at me, damn it.” She reluctantly turned her head. “There’s something going on between us.”

“Yeah, we were on our way to sex, big deal.”

“Neither of us really wants to kill the other. At least not yet, but tempt me again with another statement like that and you might just get what you expect.”

“So says you. Now that I have three of you to contend with, killing is sounding like a pretty damn good idea.”

Kane sighed. “We have to find out what happened. Both our futures depend on it now.”

Lara sat down hard on the corner of the bed and put her head in her hands. Not five minutes ago she’d been about to fuck him and probably enjoy every damned second of it. Now she fought some inner demon wanting her to find her way to freedom any way she could. Her flight or fight instinct didn’t say anything about going along for the ride.

“What’s to say someone won’t shoot me dead as soon as I walk back onto clan land?”

“No one, and I mean no one, would dare cross me like that. No clan member wants to be marked for death by me.”

The way he said those words, with the hostility shining in his eyes, sent chills down her spine. The pure malice in his tone even frightened

her. Until now she had pretty much mocked the whole black cougar myth. Now she wondered if she hadn't thought it through completely.

"Why do we need to go back? Why can't I stay here while you investigate?"

"It's not that simple. There has to be a tribunal. The council must convene and reopen the case against both you and your mother. "

Dread filled her at his words. This did not sound like a good idea at all; in fact, it was probably the worst idea she'd heard.

"What if I refuse to go?"

He stared at her without responding. He didn't look too happy at the thought of her not going along with him. Seconds ticked by with both of them staring each other down.

"Well?"

"You will go," he growled.

"You're a cold hearted bastard, Kane."

"Sometimes, when I have to be." He redressed and headed for the bathroom. "Get ready. We leave now."

His he-man attitude really bugged the crap out of her; she'd find a way to correct it. She packed up her few things, then pulled a different outfit from her bag. She opted for black leather pants, a matching halter-top, and her combat boots. She strapped a knife to her leg and easily covered it with the leather of her pants, and even managed a couple of throwing stars in her pockets. No way she'd walk into their den unarmed. While she didn't think Kane planned to harm her at this point, a girl could never be too prepared.

The cats outside seemed a lot less friendly, and there would probably be a lot more of that where she was going.

Kane stepped out of the bathroom just as she pulled her bag over her shoulder and positioned it across her back. He took one look at her and froze.

"What the hell?"

She bit back a satisfied smirk and instead turned as innocent a look as she could muster his way. "What?"

"Don't what me, you little minx. You have any idea what seeing you like that does to me?"

Good, she hoped he suffered. "I don't care."

"You will when I've got you against the wall, sliding between your thighs."

"Dream on." Damn, his words slayed her, and the arousal she'd finally cooled flared to full heat once again. So much that his nostrils flared when he caught her scent.

“We’ll see. But first, I have to get you past the others without them pouncing on that heat of yours and you slitting their throats.”

“Good idea, ’cause if anyone makes a move against me that is exactly what will happen. In fact, you’ll be the first if I find out you’re playing me.”

Kane rolled his eyes at her and walked out the door. She trailed after him, a sense of dread settling over her. She didn’t care how confident he was in his clan, this was not going to be a cakewalk, and she’d have to be on guard every minute. Even then it seemed unlikely they’d all get out this without bloodshed.

\* \* \* \*

Two hours later, Lara still sat in the passenger seat, not speaking to him. She’d demanded to drive her own car and he’d flatly refused. When she’d discovered that he’d lifted her keys when she wasn’t looking, he thought she would leap at him. She’d even bared her teeth. She acted very much like one of them, strong instincts and fast moves. He’d finally informed her either he drove or her car would be left behind. She’d glanced at the men surrounding her and he practically saw her brain calculating the odds of her starting a fight and taking any of them out before they could subdue her. At least, she had no idea how much that turned him on.

She’d climbed into the car on her own, but the tension buzzing through and around her was palpable. Things were going to get interesting. How would she handle the blatant hostility coming her way when they arrived?

They were already driving through clan owned lands and they’d arrive at his cabin in a few minutes. He hadn’t considered any other place to take her. No way did he want her in the general population. Some of the females would likely tear her from limb to limb before he got a word in edgewise. While the clan would ultimately follow the rules, if someone provoked Lara he suspected she’d strike out without thinking. One violent outburst and her appeal would be over.

Yes, it would be much easier to protect her out here. He, like the rest of his brothers, valued their peace and quiet and preferred to live away from the rest of the clan. This way they socialized when they wanted and stayed hidden when they didn’t.

When he turned off the main road onto the dirt lane that led to his place, the other vehicle following them continued on its way. He would deal with them later. He’d have to kick Nick’s ass for telling Dave and his



crony where he and Lara were located. But first, he had to settle and soothe the angry female sitting next to him.

The dense trees and bushes made it slow going the last mile, especially since he didn't want to scratch up her beloved car. When he slowed to a crawl she looked at him with a curious glance. He maneuvered them the last hundred feet and the brush cleared to an open grassy area and the log cabin he'd labored over for years getting just right.

"Wow. Where are we?"

"My home." Unlike his brother Lucas, he'd been meticulous about every detail. He liked to think he was conscientious about where he lived, but Lucas called it anal.

"Fancy place."

"I like it."

He pulled the car to a stop behind his home where he had a garage attached to both the house and the mountain behind it. More importantly, there was a network of caves through the mountain he could access via his garage. If it came down to anything happening around here he would always have an escape route.

"I thought we were going to the clan gathering area."

"It's a little late tonight, and besides, I'm going in there first to find out what the hell has been going on while I was away. Those men should not have surprised us like that."

She grabbed her bag and climbed out of the car, and he did the same. Damn, it was good to be home. He couldn't wait to get some sleep in his own bed instead of cheap motels and grassy patches in the forest. Maybe even curled around a warm female body he was burning to touch again.

When he caught up with her on the porch she held out her hand to him.

"What?"

"Keys."

"My place doesn't open with a key. A code and an infrared scanner."

"Paranoid much? I wasn't talking about your fancy place here."

It took him a second before he realized she meant her car keys. He laughed. "No way, I'm not making it that easy for you to run."

She gave him a hostile glare and pushed past him into the house. He had to admit it was kind of fun to see her get so worked up even in anger, although not nearly as exciting as her lust. He stood proudly as her gaze surveyed the room. From the suede couches to the artwork on the walls, he'd carefully chosen every piece in this room to reflect as much of the outdoors as possible. He may like human comforts, but his animal often wanted to be in the wild. So, he'd taken the time to combine them both.

Now it just felt good to be home. He toed off his boots and removed his socks so his feet could sink into the plush green carpeting. He hit a button on the wall and music filtered throughout the house. A nature CD, actually, with sounds of a forest and a soft melody in the background. Sure, he liked rock and roll and various other kinds of music, but at home he preferred the soothing sounds of nature.

He padded up behind Lara and spoke quietly. "It's late now. I imagine you're tired. Maybe after some rest you won't find this situation so repulsive."

\* \* \* \*

Lara sighed. She had a hard time holding onto her anger when he got so close; her hormones went crazy around him. Fear, on the other hand, was a completely different story. She had no one but herself to make sure this situation came out okay for her, and his hot body and wandering hands distracting her could wind up costing her a lot more than she could afford.

Still, when his hands touched her shoulders and began a slow, methodical massage of the tight muscles there, she didn't tell him to stop. She'd never been in a home like this, never even thought of a house as a restful place, but that's sure what Kane had created here. A haven to rest a weary soul. His fingers continued to her neck and she eased back into his hands.

"Good lord, woman, you seriously need to relax." Lara couldn't remember the last time she'd done something so frivolous. She lived in a perpetual state of single-minded focus on revenge, and every move she made daily had some motive behind it that would get her there.

"Relaxing could get me killed." Or worse.

He spun her around to face him and the concern in his eyes annoyed her. "Not here. My home is a sanctuary, and I go out of my way to keep it peaceful."

"It is beautiful here. You're quite a contradiction. Cold-blooded killer and sensitive, peace-loving man. It's very interesting."

"What's it going to take to convince you I'm not a cold-blooded killer? I'm a good guy."

"Uh huh. Is that what you say to all the ladies?"

His hands stilled and fell away. She'd probably gone too far, but right now she didn't care. He'd sprung this little road trip on her and she was still pissed.

“Let me show you where you’ll be staying. He brushed past her and for a split second she felt a twinge of regret. Maybe if things were different, or in a different life...

She grabbed her bag and followed after him. He’d only turned soft lighting on that gave off just enough light to get around, so she didn’t get to see much more of the place as she walked through. Tomorrow she’d get a better bearing on the layout of the house and any possible avenues of escape.

## *Chapter Six*

“Here it is.” He led her into a lush bedroom that continued the natural theme of greens and browns, as well as a few sunny splashes of yellow. The fluffy white bed looked so inviting that she barely noticed anything else. She wanted nothing more right now than to get naked and cuddle up in those blankets and pillows and sleep for a nice long time. Although, now was hardly the time to let down her guard.

“Are you hungry or anything?”

“No, I’m good. I want to sleep first and then we need to have a discussion.”

He smirked at her. “Okay, well, I’ll be at the opposite end of the hall if you need anything. Just let me know.”

Lara watched him back out of the room and close the door. Confident she was finally alone, she whirled back to the bed and threw down her bag. One leap and she landed square in the middle of the mattress, face down in the cushy bedding. She flipped over and looked up, surprised to find a series of skylights instead of a plain white ceiling like she’d expected. Sprawled across the fancy bed, she admired the beautiful view of the southern sky right down to the stars twinkling above her. False or not, it gave her a sense of freedom instead of the sensation of being trapped indoors with no escape.

Lara sighed. It wouldn’t take much to get used to a place like this. If she ever settled down she’d have to borrow some of his ideas for her house, because he’d about nailed it on the head. She’d hoped her dream of revenge would ultimately give her the peace she desperately sought.

She dragged herself up and started removing her clothes. She considered her normal t-shirt and shorts for sleeping, but these sheets and blankets were so damn soft she wanted to sleep cocooned within them with no other barrier. Naked, she shivered for a moment before crawling back into the bed. Exhausted from not sleeping much for a couple of days, Lara’s head hit the pillow with a fleeting thought to the comfort of having Kane and his powerful body wrapped around her when she gave in to exhaustion and passed out.

Kane lay in his own bed, staring skyward. He'd given up on sleep after hours of continuous thoughts of Lara's naked body just down the hall kept his dick so damn hard all he thought about was dragging her out of bed and bending her over it so he could be inside her. His canines lengthened at the image of claiming her in the most primal of ways, his teeth dragging along her spine as he did. Oh yeah, when he had his way not a single inch of skin would be left untouched. She'd beg him to bite her.

He threw off the covers and sat up. What the hell was the matter with him? She was just a woman, an exceptionally pretty and intelligent one, but still just a woman—and human at that. Not to mention she had a mean streak a mile wide. Somehow he needed to eradicate her from his system. Soon he would present her to the clan leaders and make his request. What happened next would be up to the council to decide. He had a hunch that the facts of the case would prove extenuating circumstances, but the gnawing at his gut told him there was more to this than met the eye. She may not be as evil as everyone thought, but she was trouble with a capital T.

He had to stop thinking about her soft eyes when he kissed her, or the scent of her arousal every time they got into an argument. Damn, she seemed as aggressive and as violent as any female from his clan. A woman with that kind of spirit had always turned him on. The harder to conquer, the sweeter the submission. Whatever the case, he had to think of something else. Maybe a shift and a run would exercise these thoughts long enough for him to get some rest.

He padded quietly to the door but stopped at the sound of running water from the direction of the guest room. He wondered what had her up so long before the crack of dawn, and despite his intentions to leave well enough alone, he headed in her direction to investigate.

He found her room already empty and moved to the bathroom door. He should leave now and not go any further...this couldn't lead to anything good. Someone should tell his dick that, however, because it pressed against his pants, fighting for a way out.

Steam rushed over him when he opened the door and stepped in. In seconds the scent of her arousal washed over him, too, before he even spotted her through the cloud of mist. *Oh fuck, she's masturbating.*

He should leave now. He inched closer. As the steam settled around him he spied her leaning against the wall of the shower, her head thrown

back with one hand pulling at a nipple and the other rubbing furiously at her clit.

Kane bit back a groan at the epitome of every wet dream he'd ever had. Her hair was slicked back from her face and her mouth pursed into a tiny circle as she labored for breath under the onslaught of sensation running through her.

*Hot damn.*

Wicked need seared his dick as he lost the battle for control. He wanted to watch and he wanted to get off while he did. Watching had always been his thing but this...damn, this was by far the hottest thing he'd ever witnessed.

When her fingers slid inside her pussy he almost came in his pants right where he stood. He ripped the button loose on his jeans and quickly freed his cock, taking matters into his own hand. He stroked downward with every thrust of her hand upward until his erection ached to bursting and the need clawed him from the inside out.

Damn it, why her? Anyone but her. He was just going to have to fuck her and get this out of his system.

A snarl from the shower distracted him from his thoughts and his gaze jerked back to her profile. Her head twisted side to side as she screeched a little bit more as her own orgasm got closer.

No fucking way could he let this opportunity go by, he had to taste her as she came. He jerked open the shower door and knelt down in front of her. His hands reached around to grasp her firmly muscled buttocks and drew her to his mouth.

"What the—"

Her shock faded fast when his rough tongue stabbed into her pussy, rasping over her engorged clit. Her head lolled back against the tile and she let him have his way. Not like he'd planned to give her a choice.

His hands tightened on her buttocks until she yelped out from the pressure.

"Please...Kane." She panted his name.

He grabbed her clit with his teeth and suckled it, her whole body tense against him. Her sexy little growls turned into a scream any banshee would have been proud of as her orgasm rocketed through her. He lapped at her folds as she flooded him with her cream while her hands scratched at his shoulders for more.

At the end of his short rope of control, Kane couldn't hold back any longer. The beast in him clawed to be inside her, sheathed by all that tight, wet heat and juice. She cried out in protest when he left her pussy and stood to struggle with the wet denim that stubbornly clung to his legs.

Free and naked before her, he watched her gaze travel downward and light up in appreciation when she got her first look his red, swollen shaft.

"You want me." Not really a question, but an assurance nonetheless.

She hissed at him in response. He suspected he could do anything he wanted right now and she wouldn't care as long as he fucked her. Kane flipped her over, stomach to the wall so he could take her from behind. He pressed his cock between the cheeks of her ass and she whimpered. This was exactly what he'd wanted all along: her underneath him, eager to please, desperate for him. His teeth scraped her skin along her spine, desperate to bite and lick her. The urge to mark her shocked him since he'd never felt that way before, but he pushed those thoughts aside and poised the aching crown of his cock at her entrance.

But, when he grasped her hair to pull her backwards, he spied a small mark on the back of her neck. His blood chilled at the sight. "What the fuck is that?"

His angry voice must have startled her as she whipped her head around to look at him. His hands fell to his side and he stumbled back across the shower.

She had the mark. The mark of a mate.

"Kane, what's wrong?" The alarm in her voice surprised him.

"The mark on the back of your neck. Oh, God." He opened the shower and stumbled away from her. He grabbed a towel and stomped from the room, toweling off as he went. This was so not happening to him. *No.*

He sank onto the bed, trying to make some sense out of an impossible situation. The water shut off and a few minutes later she emerged through the door wrapped in a towel, which did absolutely nothing to hide her lush figure. Despite the shock coursing through him, his dick still stood up hard and ready when he saw her. Now he knew why.

The chemistry between mates was undeniable. It was nature's way of making certain they would procreate. They could fall in love and mate with anyone, but a natural born marked mate was an everlasting thing. If he bit her birthmark there would never be another for either one of them. *Ever.* Their chemistry would be linked forever. Despite knowing the consequences his entire body still ached to claim her, to take what was meant for him and bite her.

It all made so much more sense, now yet it complicated the hell out of his plans. He only wanted to get her out of his system. Now what would he do? Mating was out of the question.

"You going to explain to me what the hell that was about? Why get me all worked up like that just to leave me?" Her anger lashed out at him.

He put his head in his hands, trying not to look at her. He still tasted her on his tongue and her scent. God help him, he'd never scented something as sweet and wild as her.

"Your birthmark."

"What of it? It's not some weird growth, it's just a pale mark I've had from birth. What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

She stepped up to him, mere inches away. When he raised his head he found her towel-covered breasts right in front of his face. *Must resist.* She grabbed at the fold holding the covering in place and dropped the towel. Blood drained from his face and straight to his cock.

"Lara, we can't..."

She pushed him back on the bed and he didn't have the will to stop her. That she still desired him after him abandoning her in need made him want her all the more.

"Don't make me tie you, Kane."

He barked out a laugh. "I'd like to see you try."

She crawled up on his lap and nestled her moist warmth along the length of his erection and rested her palms across his nipples.

*Damn vixen.* He really liked this, her on top of him acting all aggressive. Sharp fingernails dug into his skin and scratched the length of his chest. He sucked in a sharp breath at the small strips of flesh she took with her. Pain mingled with lust. When she bent down and licked at his wounds he went berserk.

He snarled and hissed at her. "Damn it, woman. Do you want me to hurt you? Don't you know it's dangerous to draw out the beast like that?"

She rose and guided the tip of his cock to her entrance. "Good!" She slammed down on his shaft, taking all of him in one hard stroke. They both gasped and jerked against each other. When she began to move against him he grabbed her waist and took back the control. He drove upward, seating himself ever farther. From the look on her face he knew he'd touched the right spot. Her tongue panted from her mouth.

"Fuck, you're right." He seethed through his teeth. In fact, her pussy strangled him. All shred of common sense faded as he stroked in and out of her, with the sucking sounds her pussy made all he could think of.

On a sudden scream probably heard for miles, her orgasm broke. Yet another reason to be glad he'd moved out here so far from everyone else. The last thing he needed right now would be for anyone to come running to investigate. Her muscles clamped down around him again, dragging all other thoughts from his brain except how good it felt to be inside her.

*His mate.*



His mouth watered at the sight of her sweat-soaked skin as she leaned over him. His damn canines of literally ached with the need to bite her, but he couldn't do it. What would his council say? Hell, what would his brothers say? He was just supposed to fuck her and forget her.

He listened to her heart racing as her screams died out and she panted for breath. It had been such a beautiful sight; he wanted to make her come again, but the way she rode him harder and harder there was no way he'd last much longer.

"Fuck, baby, you're going to make me come."

"Yes, Kane, come now, with me." With that she let out a long, low wail eerily similar to the females of his clan. Her soft skin and dewy heat connected with his on every thrust, teasing him until he too yelled out in release. He came up off the bed and found his mouth on her shoulder, the sharp tips pushing against the thin skin. Thankfully, she pushed him back to the bed and dug into him with her nails again. He shuddered and groaned and rode through the pulses and shivers of their combined orgasm.

Damn, he couldn't remember sex ever being this intense with anyone before. When she slumped forward against his chest he didn't even wince at the pain she caused just from touching his nail wounds. The knowledge that she had a bent for rough sex as much as he did made him grin and wrap his arms around her.

Eventually their skin cooled and she shivered against him. He gently slid from her body and tucked her into his shoulder before wrapping them both in a blanket. If nothing else, they could at least rest for a couple of hours before the sun rose.

Then they would have to talk about the impossible.

## *Chapter Seven*

Lara woke to the sounds of nature and streaming sunlight flooding the room. Disoriented for a minute, she glanced around and remembered. Kane had brought her here, and this was his house. Relaxing back into the pillow, she admired the skylight that covered almost one hundred percent of the ceiling. Last night the starry sky had seemed surreal, but looking up now at the blue sky and moving clouds definitely gave her the illusion of being outside.

When the memories of her and Kane and their early morning hour activity hit her, she didn't know whether to laugh or throw something. He'd entered the shower with her on the verge of a much needed orgasm, and she'd made the split decision to fling all caution out the window and have a good time. They both needed it, and for her it had been far too long. Hell, even a few days seemed too long, and with thoughts of her and Kane in this bed, a few hours felt too long.

She jerked herself from the bed, blocking the images and the need that went with them. There were far more serious matters to attend to. She needed a plan of escape when things got ugly, and they most certainly would. Some part of her believed Kane wanted to do the right thing here, but when push came to shove she wasn't totally sure whose side he would end up on.

She bent and stretched out her muscles, ready to get the blood pumping and the day moving.

"Damn, woman, you trying to kill me?"

She popped up, ready to smart mouth him, but the words died on her lips when she spied the gorgeous grin on his face and the lust shining in his eyes. How could he look at her like that, even now? In the cold light of day she found it impossible to put their troubles behind them. He expected her to face his council in a Tribunal she might not be able to escape from.

"How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Think about sex when both our lives are at stake." He should be focused on the danger, not the amazing dick he had in his pants. Unwittingly her gaze slid down. Oh hell, he already had a hard on.

“Seems like the perfect time to me. If my life is in danger I want some really hot sex before I go and you, babe, are HOT.”

She dragged her gaze back to his face. “You need a cold shower.”

“Ouch.” He clutched at his chest and she laughed as she threw one of the bed pillows at him.

“I need another shower and some food. Will it kill you to feed a hungry girl after she fucked your brains out?”

A wicked and suggestive grin spread across his face. “You talk to everyone with that mouth?”

She arched her brow and did her best *are you kidding me* look before turning on her heel for the bathroom.

“Lara, wait. I actually came in here to tell you I’m going out for a while.”

She stopped in her tracks and turned back.

“I have to give a report this morning and I need you to stay here and stay put.”

“A report on me?”

He nodded. “Will you stay?”

Damn it. If he’d ordered her to stay she would have been out the door right behind him, but the fact that he asked her to stay melted something inside of her and made her want to be here when he got back.

“Yes.” She couldn’t say more beyond the simple word. Not only did she feel suddenly vulnerable, but she didn’t want to screw this up with her normal sarcasm.

“Good.” He stepped forward and pulled her into his arms. He smelled like clean soap and...

“Is that bacon that I smell?”

“You’re good, baby. Yes, I made breakfast for you. Bacon, eggs, and toast, and it’s sitting on a platter in the warm oven waiting for you.

“I think I love you.” She planted a quick kiss against his lips and wriggled from his arms in her rush to get a quick shower and the food her stomach grumbled for.

“Okay then. I’ll leave you to it and be back in a few hours. I’ve probably got every gadget known to mankind in either the living room or the study just off the kitchen if you want to watch some television or surf the Net. Although, everything is cleverly hidden, but since you’re such a smart girl I’m sure you can figure it out.”

“Sure, sure, no problem.” She only half listened to him as she went about her quick two-minute shower and then dressed in clean jeans and a plain baby blue t-shirt. She opted to forgo the bra, not only because it

simply felt better but eventually he'd be back and she wanted to distract him. She wasn't above using anything to get what she wanted.

She quickly found the food and scarfed down every bite of what he'd left her. Looking down at the empty plate, she marveled at her appetite. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten that much in one sitting, and for a fleeting moment wondered if he'd put something in it to get her to eat all of it.

No, she wouldn't let her paranoia get the best of her. Instead she'd keep focusing on the facts thus far. Kane had been upfront with her about what was happening, and she had no cause for thinking of his potential treachery...yet. She pushed away from the kitchen table and cleaned up after herself, she was a guest in his home, after all, and occasionally she did remember a few manners.

With the kitchen now spotless, she hunted around for something to do next. Sitting around and doing nothing never suited her very well. She remembered his comments about electronics and thought checking her email might not be a bad idea. There weren't many people she kept up with these days, but she often conducted business via e-mail when necessary, so it benefited her to check in from time to time.

Walking into the living room, she observed only the one doorway leading off of it. She slipped into the study and looked around. The natural earth tones and handmade wooden furniture continued through here. A desk and chair sat in the corner, but no computer. What had he said about having to find them? She began searching through drawers and cabinets to no avail.

*All right, Lara, he said they were here so think about it, where would you hide a computer?* She sat down behind the desk and began feeling along the edges for secret latches or compartments. Thirty seconds later her fingers hit a tiny lever she almost missed and sprang open a hidden drawer. There inside sat a slim laptop, multiple cell phones, and a PDA. All state of the art, high-end equipment. Kane, the fun loving, horndog brother of the trio kept secrets hidden behind that façade of his.

She removed the laptop and carried it with her to the living room. She'd watch some television or something while she waited. Not, however, until she pulled up Google Earth and studied the satellite images of the region she'd returned to. He had the home turf advantage over her, and it never hurt to know as much information about the situation she found herself in. Much easier to come up with a plan of action that way.

Self-preservation 101.

As usually happened when Lara got involved in her research, hours passed and she lost track of time. She stretched her arms and decided to make some fresh coffee. Walking to the kitchen, a knock sounded at the front door. Lara paused in her tracks and debated what to do. Kane had said they were pretty far from the rest of the clan and hadn't said a word about expecting anyone to stop by. Maybe she'd ignore it and pretend not to be here.

Still curious to know who'd arrived, she padded silently to the window to check it out.

"I can hear you in there."

She sighed. *Damn cats*. This one was female, though, and didn't look particularly friendly.

"Kane's not here." She called through the door, reluctant to let anyone she didn't know inside. She wasn't exactly the most popular person around here, and her defenses were somewhat weak in the face of a shifter.

"I didn't come here to see Kane. I want to speak with you."

That threw Lara back. A feline coming to see her...at Kane's place. How did she even know about her, unless Kane sent her?

Lara wrenched open the door and stared down the pretty blonde woman standing on the porch. She eyed her cautiously from the short denim dress and sandals that tied up her calves to the bright red polish on her nails.

"What do you want with me?" she asked impatiently. The hair on the back of her neck had stood on end the minute she opened the door and her adrenalin had kicked up a notch or two.

"I thought we should meet."

"And why is that?" Her instincts screamed she wasn't going to like the direction this conversation was headed.

"Considering my relationship with Kane, I think I should be informed about the trouble he is brewing up with the clan."

Her relationship. The words stabbed at her pride and suddenly her stomach tightened in knots.

"He should be back soon, you can ask him yourself." Lara tried to shut the door but the woman slapped her hand on the wood and pushed, catching her off guard.

"I will talk to Kane, but first I want to talk to you, and if you know what's good for you, you'll listen like a good little human."

The woman's sickly sweet southern accent turned Lara's stomach as she tamped down the desire to kick some serious ass. She laughed instead.

But, she doubted anyone would consider it a funny ha-ha kind of sound. More like a warning to anyone with half a brain.

“I’m not anyone’s version of a good little anything. Never have been and never will.” She clenched her hands into fists. She wasn’t totally green. Years of martial arts training whenever she could fit it in gave her at least something to work with.

“Feisty too, I see. You don’t have to get your panties all in a twist because of little ole me. I didn’t come here to hurt you. At least, not this time.”

Lara considered the fact this woman was a shifter and physically more powerful than herself, which had no impact on her need to attack her. She thought about what magic she could conjure up, but without even a small amulet she was woefully unprepared for a battle.

“Say what you’ve come to say and then get out. You’ve got thirty seconds.”

“Don’t get too comfortable here. Kane may want to fuck you, but that will soon wear off and eventually he’ll get around to doing his duty...he always does. I can guarantee you, you won’t be leaving clan land again except in a box. And as for Kane, he is mine. We are to be mated at the next full moon, so don’t go getting any wild ideas about something more from him.” Suddenly the bitch’s nose flared as if catching a scent. Her face mottled with angry shades of red as she sniffed her way around Lara.

“You bitch!” she shrieked just before her hand wrapped around Lara’s neck, cutting off her air supply.

Lara clawed at her hands and twisted and turned her body, trying everything to break free from the chokehold. She stomped on one of the shifter’s sandaled feet and got a vicious snarl in return. She didn’t let go, but it loosened her grip just long enough to get some air.

Lara swung her right fist upward and connected with the bitch’s jaw in an easy uppercut. Her head sprang back and she let go of Lara. With probably only a fraction of a second to spare, Lara turned and ran with the idea of getting to one of the bedrooms and locking herself in. That should give her at least a minute or two to find some sort of weapon.

She didn’t even make it past the kitchen before she was tackled. Sharp claws dug viciously into her back as they both tumbled to the ground.

The woman grabbed a fistful of hair and yanked her head back. Lara bucked and fought, even with the sound of her favorite shirt being ripped from her back.

“What the hell is that?” The woman screamed so loud Lara winced at the sound so close to her ear. She sounded worse than a damn banshee.

Suddenly the woman was gone from her back and Lara lay free against the cold wood floor.

“Katherine, what the hell are you doing?”

Relief flooded through her at the sound of Kane’s voice. Shame, too. She’d been caught unprepared and likely would have been killed. She’d let her guard down for him, giving herself a chance to potentially believe in someone else. When would she learn?

She rolled onto her back and watched Katherine smooth down her dress and hair before she spoke. Lara rolled her eyes at the ludicrousness of her moves.

“You had no right coming here like this. You need to get out of my house right now.”

“Me? I have no right? What about you? Why have you not done your job already? And what the hell is that mark on the back of her neck? Is that what I think it is?”

Kane grabbed her then, his beefy hand wrapped tight around her bicep. She cried out in pain but he didn’t ease up. “You will do well to forget what you’ve seen here today. I’m warning you.”

She hissed at Kane, baring her sharp little teeth. Her eyes glowed gold and her claws extended on her hand. The bone structure of her face and hands changed and Lara realized she’d partially shifted.

“Don’t take me lightly, Katherine. I’m deadly serious here. This is none of your business, you need to remember that.”

The woman’s features changed back to full human and she gave Kane a sickly sweet smile. “Not everyone is afraid of you, you know. Guardian doesn’t mean God.”

Kane steered her back to the front door, giving her no chance to say much else. “Tell your father our deal is off.”

“You fucking bastard. You think you can just throw me out like yesterday’s trash? For—for her?”

“Leave now.”

She dug her heels in at the threshold of the door and turned around to face them. “You.” She pointed at Lara. “This is your fault. It’s you who will pay and it won’t be fun, at least not for you.” She laughed, a chilling sound that raised gooseflesh along Lara’s arms.

Tired of dealing with the bullshit of this scene, Lara spun on her heels and headed for her room. She rubbed the back of her neck where she knew the birthmark was and wondered why the hell they were all freaking out about it, and why the hell was it itching all of a sudden? As soon as his crazy cat bitch left she would demand some answers. They needed to have a talk.

\* \* \* \*

Kane slammed the door behind Katherine and leaned against the wood. The day had been complicated enough, he didn't need a jealous bitch to add to the mix. He'd gotten her out of the house and away from Lara, but the damage was done. He couldn't trust her to keep her mouth shut for a minute, let alone long enough for him to figure out what they were doing here. Now Lara had stormed to the back of the house, killing his hopes of more fun from this morning. She'd want answers and he wasn't sure if he was prepared to give them.

Why had he given into the deal with Katherine's father? He'd known from the start it would backfire on him. Because he wanted his brothers back, that's why, and to do that he needed allies. Now things had gone from bad to worse.

Despite the serious nature of his work, today he'd found his mind wandering back to her every few minutes. Walking around all day in a constant state of arousal had cranked him up to the point of madness. He'd cut the questioning short and raced home to be with her.

"What's going on, Kane?"

He raised his brow at the detached tone of her voice. When he sniffed the air around her he got nothing. No fear, no anger, just nothing. It was downright scary when she did that and reminded him just how ruthless she could be.

"Taking out the trash." He quirked the corners of his mouth into a tight and hopeful smile.

"Uh huh. Now tell me what's really going on here. Oh, and yeah, it would have been nice if you'd mentioned your girlfriend before I ended up face first on the ground."

Kane winced at her sarcasm. This was one of those days when he wanted to curse his brother for doing this to him. Just a few short weeks ago he'd had very little to worry about. No pressure to procreate, no kill orders to complete, and no wayward mates on the death list driving him insane with lust.

"I don't have a girlfriend. What I do have, however, is a damn headache from arguing with people today, so if you're planning to jump on that bandwagon go sing it somewhere else."

He walked into the kitchen and searched the fridge for something to drink. What he needed right now was a drink—anything, really, to take his mind off the woman standing behind him watching him. He felt her gaze raking over him, hot and steady. The air now scented of her anger and it



did nothing but make his dick harder in his pants. He was like an uncontrollable teenager. *Maybe a cold shower?*

"I'm afraid you've made a mistake."

Kane turned, the chill of her voice warning him. "Mistake?"

"For some unknown reason you think I give a damn about what kind of day you've had, but I don't. You brought me here and the first thing I'm doing is fending off your little jealous bitch. This is bullshit and you know it."

A low growl sounded from his chest. He fought to tamp down his temper before he tackled her to the ground and bit her. Whether she realized it or not, this was foreplay. He took two strides forward and she stepped back. "Are you sure you want to push me now? Because some things can't be taken back."

"Spare me."

His nostrils flared when the scent in the room changed. She was no longer just angry. Uh huh. The animal he couldn't suppress aroused her. He took another step and her body hit the wall when she tried to back away.

"I'm serious, Kane. Coming here was a bad idea." Her words died on her lips when he bent and sniffed at her neck.

"You're wet."

"Christ, Kane. This is serious business." Her hands pushed at his chest but he didn't back down.

"Yes it is." He nipped at her bottom lip lightly with his teeth over and over, teasing and playing with her until she groaned from his touch. She could fight him all she wanted but nature would win, she always did. "But you're still wet and just as hot as I am."

She shook her head against his lips. "Stop playing. I want some answers."

His fingers rubbed her breasts, grazing the nipples through the shirt she wore. She leaned into his hands on a low moan. He loved the sounds she made when he touched her almost as much as her screams when he made her come.

He squeezed and pinched her hard tips until she gasped, yet still she made no real move to get away. "Ask me anything you want." A slight tremble moved through her shoulders as she fought for normal breath. Her hands roamed at his waist, pulling at his shirt until she loosened it from his pants.

"You're overdressed."

He fought a smile at her statement. Gone were the protests and instead the hunger gripped her as well. "Then you should do something about that."

Her hands reached for the buttons of his shirt, twisting each one apart. When they were all unfastened she pushed the shirt from his shoulders, the pads of her fingers grazing against his skin. He bared his teeth at the streaks of heat the sensual move created and she chuckled at him.

"You're not the only one who can enjoy the games, you know."

"It's like playing with fire and it's hard to hold it back."

She yanked her top over her head and her unclothed breasts bounced in front of him. The loud rumble of a purr sounded in his throat and she gave him a wicked smile when she hooked the waistband of her pants. "Then don't."

She had no idea what she asked for. She'd set the pace before but he didn't think he could let that happen this time. Only one way to find out.

He dragged her to the floor with him and pushed her to her knees and hands. Ravenous hunger raged through him as he helped her pull her pants and the flimsy piece of lace she called panties down. Pale, smooth flesh drew him like a moth to flame. How was he supposed to resist this? A powerful rush of lust and triumph raced through him while he caressed the baby soft skin of her bare ass. His claws protracted and scraped lightly across the tender flesh while spikes of adrenalin directed his every move.

With his head filled with thoughts of getting inside her as quickly as possible, her hair fell around her face and revealed her mark. His mouth salivated with savage need. Precious seconds passed while he worked to stay in control before he bent and gave in to the desire to taste and lick his way across her heated skin.

He knew he couldn't mark her, but he damn sure could fuck her until thoughts of biting her left him. Yet, his mouth traveled up to the back of her neck and his tongue swiped the small mark.

"What is it with my birthmark? Why is everyone making a big deal out of it?" she asked breathlessly.

He absently answered her, too lost in touching her. "It's your mating mark. It's the sign of a black cougar."

Her body went rigid underneath him and in a split second he realized what he'd done.

She rolled from underneath him and came up in front of him, too quick for him to stop her. She kned him under the chin and he fell backwards against the wall. Pain exploded in his head and his body reacted on instinct. He charged her and tackled her to the ground, but he didn't have a good grip on her and she wriggled herself free.

“Calm down and let me explain.”

“Get the fuck away from me. Now!”

The hatred in her voice startled, not to mention offended, him. It was not as if he'd been forcing himself on her. He'd never done that in his life, and he wasn't about to now. Fine, let her cool her jets for a while.

He gave her one last hard glare before walking away. He didn't need this shit.

Which was a damn lie.

## Chapter Eight

Bran paced the floor of his study, restless and irritated. The council elders had listened to Kane's request and, against some small opposition—himself included—decided to grant a tribunal to the damned witch. In a few days time, when everyone could be gathered, the case against Marlene would be reopened and examined thoroughly. That sure didn't give him much time to find a way to stop it.

The cougar's weakness had grated on his last nerve while in the meeting. He'd sat there watching him, looking for a way to get to him and dearly wishing he could go ahead and get it over with already, and just snap his neck. Lucas had been flawed as well, but he never disregarded a kill order. He could always be counted on to follow through on his duty as a death enforcer.

He should have fought harder against forcing Lucas out of the clan. He'd have been more than happy to see Lara dead for her crimes, and no amount of sweet-talking would have worked on him. Not a cougar who'd joined with a born mate. *Born mate*. With the first appearance of a born mate after decades with none, the traditions and quality of the clan would be threatened.

Why couldn't Kane have just done his duty and followed his orders? What had happened to make him so weak? The Guardians weren't known for their generosity, damn it. He needed to think on it and surely something would come to him. He'd either find a way out of this mess or clean house, whatever it took.

"Hey, Daddy."

He looked up to see his eldest daughter Katherine standing in the doorway—his only daughter as far as anyone in the clan knew. Her face was flushed bright red and she had scratches on her arms and legs.

"What happened to you?"

"Had a run in with Kane's new bitch." She crossed to his mini bar and poured herself a drink.

"Damn it, girl, don't you ever fucking listen?" She flinched at his words but he didn't care. It drove him absolutely insane when people didn't follow his instructions. "I told you to stay away from them. You

push that boy too hard and he'll kill you instead of breeding you. Stop being a stupid child and do as I tell you from now on."

"But, Daddy..."

He cut her off with his raised hand. "No, enough is enough around here. If you hadn't stuck your nose where it doesn't belong you wouldn't even know about her, and this situation with the girl is going to be a mess. She's dangerous and not to be trifled with."

"She's just a human. I can take care of myself against her."

He sighed. "She got away from three black cougars a few short weeks ago. Never underestimate your enemy. Unless, of course, you want to lose."

She rolled her eyes and he clenched his hands to keep from slapping her. She may be his child, but she had an attitude problem in desperate need of adjustment.

"Katherine, for once in your life just do as I ask. Your disobedience is getting old and no male in this clan is ever going to accept you unless you learn to behave, or at the very least learn some subtlety."

"Have you ever considered that not everyone has to bend to your will, Father?" she asked him coldly.

"Get out then. If you're going to ignore my advice and instructions, then you need to leave and learn for yourself what you can and cannot do in this clan to survive. You are nothing but a fool. Don't come back until you're ready to accept your place, either." He turned his back to her and strode to the window. He wasn't so sure Kane would ever be able to handle his Katherine. She needed a strong hand and a lot of guidance, not to mention some discipline here and there.

But, in the end, she was a smart girl who didn't want to be on her own. She would listen. So he waited for her to say something more. To beg for his forgiveness, maybe cry a little, but ultimately give him what he wanted.

"Before you kick me out, you might want to know I have some interesting information. Something that could cause lots and lots of chaos if it were revealed."

The threatening tone of her voice chilled him to the bone. Maybe his daughter had more of him in her than he thought.

\* \* \* \*

Lara hurriedly dressed in shorts and a tee before making a grab for her running shoes. Staying cooped up in this house for one minute more was out of the question. With little regard to whom or what she might

encounter around here, she was going for a run. She opened the front door and ran headlong into Kane. *Fuck.*

“Running away isn’t an option.”

“I’m not running away, I’m just running. I need to get out of this house and away from you for a while. Things are out of control.”

“The perimeter of the property is five miles, stay within it and you shouldn’t have any problems. Go outside it and you’re on your own.”

“Yes, Sir.” She gave him a mock salute to go with her smart-ass response and sprinted off the porch. Her legs were cold and unstretched so the first few minutes were a challenge, but once she warmed up she got up to full speed. Something about going for a run in nature always cleared her mind and lifted her mood.

The colors of the plants and trees exploded around her as she ran through the unfamiliar grounds, making sure to keep track of her distance as much as possible. The fresh scent of earth and wildlife perked up her senses as she made her way across a shallow stream. Tension and anger eventually gave way to the loose and lax sensation freedom always gave her. It had been far too long since she’d given herself a chance to stop and think. After a while of running the sweat soaked through her clothes and her energy began to wane, but the setting sun lured her to keep going and enjoy it for as long as possible.

She slowed to a stop and movement from the corner of her left eye caught her attention. She spun around, catching a quick glimpse of a large dark animal behind a stand of trees. A grizzly?

No, this was no bear, but she was being followed. “You can come out now.” She waited to see if he’d show himself.

The huge black cat bounded out from behind the tree and ran towards her. For a minute she held her breath and worried whether he would attack her. She presented him the perfect opportunity to carry out her death sentence. Without her magick she had nothing to protect herself. *Damn, he really is humongous.*

It slowed a few feet in front of her and stared at her with his golden eyes. This was the first time she’d gotten more than a fleeting glimpse of one of the black cougars. Malcolm had never shifted in front of her, and when she’d had to fight them there hadn’t been time to really look at them.

Seeing him like this twisted her up. He edged forward and nuzzled her hand and she scratched him behind his ears, loving the soft silky sensation of his fur. This complicated things. *He* complicated things. Hell, the whole situation did. Life had seemed simpler when her only goal had been to kill. Kill or be killed had been her whole life, even when she worked with Malcolm in her attempt to find a weakness.

She crouched down on her heels, bringing herself to eye level with Kane. "I didn't need you to protect me out here, you know. I can take care of myself." He purred under her hand and some of her anger dissipated. Apparently she was a sucker for a pretty face and a sexy purr. Who knew?

"You know, a little purring isn't going to get us out of this mess." She said her words through a smile and he nuzzled against her cheek, and lord help her, she nuzzled him right back. She couldn't resist cuddling up with a sexy, sleek black cat whose sole purpose in life was killing. Or so she'd thought, but the more time she spent with Kane the more she came to realize he had a human side, too, not to mention a human body that made her scream so loud she would likely disturb anyone for miles.

All the emotions of the day crashed in on her, mixing in with this inexplicable draw to the cougar in her arms. She wanted him and she wanted peace. Her eyes slid closed on the thought and the air around her changed as he shifted back to the Kane she was beginning to know well. They looked at each other but neither spoke for a minute, reluctant to break the mood. He nudged at her neck again, this time with skin instead of fur. His lips traced across her neck and chin to her mouth where he probed and licked the inside.

With a certain weakness for his kisses she suddenly couldn't remember why she was mad at him. It would come to her later. How could anyone be expected to think straight when her clit throbbed like a musical instrument? When his arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her off balance, she fell forward, feeling much of his naked body pressed against her. *Fuck, he feels good.*

"You shouldn't do that."

"Do what?" She wickedly licked a nipple, taking him by surprise.

"Get aroused around a naked man who can smell you." His hips pressed forward, the thick erection solid against her stomach.

"Then you shouldn't be rubbing against me." She was losing her train of thought quickly. Thick, mutual desire wrapped around them and whipped into her from every direction.

"You like that, huh?"

"Not at all."

His deep, rumbling laugh rolled over her in lust filled waves. She wanted more. More touching, more kissing, all of it. Despite their fucked up pasts and present he seemed to want her more than ever. Later she would demand the answers she needed, but for now she only wanted to scream for him.

Kane shifted position and rubbed his cock against the inside of her thigh, a sensation that drove her wild.

“We should go back.” It took a second for his words to sink into her lust clogged brain, and she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. They were alone, he was naked, and he wanted to leave? “I only came out here to get you because I’m not confident you’re safe out here alone. Call it a crazy hunch if you want.”

“We both knew me coming back here was a risky move, you should have let me go.”

He scraped his teeth along her jaw. “Letting go isn’t an option for either of us.”

“What do you mean?” She let her hands wander down his back, loving every inch of hard muscle he flexed holding her up. Determined to take away the control holding him back, she dug in her nails and scratched at his back and down to his tight ass. Kane snarled in her ear, reached for her shorts and shoved them down her legs.

\* \* \* \*

With her bare pussy under him, she wrapped her legs around him and hooked her feet behind his back. She writhed in his arms, grinding herself against him. Every time the heat of her sex rubbed against his shaft he thought he’d die on the spot. Damn woman would drive him crazy before this was all over.

“I can’t control...” A sudden gasp stole her words. He must have hit just the right spot.

“No, baby, you definitely can’t control it, and every time you try, I’m going to take it away. You’ll burn right alongside me. Dying for more.”

Unable to stand another second of not being inside her, he used one hand to tilt her hips and drove his dick deep into her warmth. She screamed, her voice loud and breathy around them, which barely registered compared to the sensation of her tight inner muscles giving way to his strokes.

“Oh, yes...” she groaned.

The pleasure was unbelievable, so strong he could come now even though he didn’t want to. Not yet. He slowed his movements, pulling back nice and slow before easing his way back in.

“Please, Kane...torture...please, harder,” she begged.

“Anything for you, baby.” He tightened his grip on her hip as plunged in harder, deeper than before. His mouth latched onto her shoulder and bit down. They might not be able to mate, but damned if he didn’t have to at least mark her. She was his.



The taste of her blood on his lips sent him into a frenzy as he powered furiously in and out of her. Her muscles clamped down on him as tight as a fist with each thrust. Resisting the driving hunger and need was useless.

“Sweet Jesus, Lara, you’re fucking milking me with that tight pussy of yours. So much heat it’s like liquid fire surrounding me. C’mon, baby, give it to me, give me all you’ve got.”

Her final scream of release pushed him over the edge as he drove deep one last time, exploding in his own heated orgasm. The spasms from them both rocketed them together as they fell together in the cushioned grass.

He couldn’t move; she’d drained him and left him exhausted. Her little post-release whimpers cracked further into his heart as he snuggled her close. He couldn’t recall ever being so, satisfied and complete as he was with her in his arms and the need to protect that ached through him. Problem was, she could very well be the death of him.

## Chapter Nine

Occasionally a time comes when you have to admit you're fucked. When your simple plans for the future have been so thoroughly trampled on, you have to face the change and forget the past. For Kane, this was his fate with Lara. She'd tried to kill his brother and his mate and he'd helped stopped her, but not hated her like a good man should. He'd lusted after her from the moment they met.

He'd kept silent when he received the order to track and kill her, not because he wanted to do the job, but because he'd take any excuse he could use to find her. Unfortunately, finding out why didn't resolve his issues, only made them more difficult. Mating with her now could end up getting them both killed, and not mating with her would likely drive him mad. Every time he got near her—hell, if he even scented her—he wanted to claim her.

Now, to make things more complicated, he was starting to actually *like* her. She had a wicked dark side and a knack for creating havoc, but the loyalty to her dead mother had created that. At least, in part. It was a trait he could identify with because he knew first hand the importance of the family bond. Very little could be more important. In fact, right now he couldn't think of anything.

Today, when he'd talked to the council about her, he'd received even more resistance than he'd expected. Over half of them stood up against his decision to not carry out his duty, and he'd had to argue her defense to hard headed, set-in-the-old-ways-clan members. Fortunately, many of the voting members didn't live in the small village, but instead on isolated parcels a good distance away. Male cougars were solitary for the most part and sometimes their human DNA couldn't overcome that.

So, he had a few days to prepare. He'd started here in his study on the Internet, looking up any public information he could find about Lara and her mother, which unfortunately was sparse although not altogether surprising for people who didn't quite fall in the full human category. Supernatural abilities were guarded closely since no one wanted to be responsible for starting a war.

There were some school records on Lara, a Social Security number, and a birth record. The bare minimum for functioning in this day and age. He looked at the birth certificate and found her father listed as unknown. She'd been born February twenty-third, twenty-five years ago, delivered at home by a midwife in a rural town south of Asheville. Only a few hours from here.

Next, he checked her Social Security records and found no work history. The last public information he'd found were from high school, but after she graduated she went off the grid and had successfully hidden since. Smart girl.

Since researching her didn't produce anything, he decided to switch gears and look up the mother. More of the same there. The mother, Marlene, had no records from her entire adult life. Made no sense. To survive there had to have been money, and getting it always required paperwork. Job applications, tax statements, any number of things. There had to be something somewhere, unless Marlene had a false identify. *Curious.*

Switching over to financial records, he decided to follow the money trail. Thirty minutes later he had absolutely nothing except a pain buzzing in his head from frustration. Something was out there, he just needed to uncover it. If push came to shove he'd grab an image of Lara off his home security system and start running it for facial recognition. He'd need some expert help on this one.

"Morning." He jumped at Lara's voice. "Jeez, nervous much?" She laughed as she settled herself in the chair across from him.

"I thought you were still sleeping."

"I was until the scent of coffee finally permeated my tired brain and woke me up." She saluted him with the coffee cup she held.

He shut down the laptop and slid it back into the drawer. "You hungry? The kitchen is well stocked."

She shook her head. "I want to know about my mark."

"Well, good morning to you, too, and let's get right to the heart first thing." He laughed.

"I'm serious." The storm brewing in her eyes was enough of an indication that he wasn't going to talk his way out of this conversation.

"No worries, baby, I know you are."

"How can I possibly have the mark of the black cougar? I'm not a shapeshifter. And just because I have the so-called mark doesn't mean a thing to me, so why is everyone here making such a big deal out of it?" She rubbed at the back of her neck absently as she sipped her coffee.

"Why are you rubbing it right now? Does it itch?"

She froze, hand on her neck and cup to her lip, considering... “The back of my neck does tingle a little.”

“That’s because your mate is in proximity and you aren’t fully mated yet.”

“Whoa, fully mated what the hell does that mean?”

He sighed and walked over to her. She really wasn’t going to like his answer. “I marked you.”

“You did what?” She stood and slammed her mug on his desk. “How the fuck did you do that? And what the hell does that mean? Are you deliberately trying to provoke me?” She grabbed the metal paperweight from his desk and lobbed it at him. He ducked and it missed his head but nailed his shoulder instead.

“Damn it, woman, what the hell?”

“Answer me!”

“Sit back down and I will.” He rubbed his throbbing shoulder. “Do you remember me biting you in the woods yesterday? Check your left shoulder, you wear my mark now.”

She slipped her hand under the edge of her collar and felt around. He guessed she’d found it when her face turned rage red all over again. “I guess this is what I get for consorting with animals.”

“An animal you begged for yesterday, so don’t be a bitch.”

“Tell me the rest.” She sat back down and picked up her coffee.

He couldn’t blame her for being angry. The biting had been a bad idea, but something about her drove him wild, and when they were fucking he had little control where she was concerned.

“I don’t know how to explain why you carry the mark, it makes no sense. Historically we have to share some part of the same bloodline for you to do so. But, it’s been decades since we’ve had a born mate within the clan. It’s one of the reasons our kind has been so against inner species breeding for so long. When shapeshifter DNA starts mingling with other species anything is possible. It could be nothing or it could be chaos, not something the council is eager to find out.”

“But Lucas just did it. That woman wasn’t a shifter.”

“Yes, he did, and he isn’t here anymore. He’s been shunned pending a long term study to see what happens to their abilities and any children they bear. The phenomenon that Kira possessed it without our DNA is what keeps her alive. They might not realize it, but I’m certain the council is watching them with a closer eye than they suspect.”

He held up his hand to halt her response. “Are you sure you want to remind me about how involved you were with my brother and his mate?”

She winced, and a pang of guilt clenched in his stomach. Why, he couldn't imagine. He wasn't the one who committed the crimes, and motivation or not, she did cause a lot of trouble for them all.

Neither one of them spoke for several minutes as they stared at each other. His anger held steady as he contemplated what to tell her next. When the silence stretched on he stood and walked to the window. These conflicting desires of either fucking her or choking her would be the death of him.

The faint whisper of skin against leather sounded behind him but he didn't want to watch her leave the room. He had a hunch he'd be seeing her back soon enough when she opted to walk out of his life. *If she gained her freedom.*

"Kane!" She screamed his name a split second before the window in front of him shattered into a million pieces that rained down on him as she tackled him to the ground.

"What the fuck?"

"Shooter!" No sooner than she screamed the word at him was the room riddled with automatic gunfire. Holy hell, did they have an entire firing squad out there? His beast roared to life, forcing the shift. He only had seconds.

"In the kitchen underneath the sink is a trap door. Get there and follow it."

"I'm not leaving you—"

He snarled at her. "Damn it, Lara, the house has been breached, you will do as I say before you get us both killed."

Her face twisted in anger, but she shut the fuck up and headed towards the door on her hands and knees. The fur and teeth sprang forth as his body shifted, releasing the pain he suffered from forcing it back long enough to get her out of the room. He only waited a few minutes for the gunfire to cease before he leapt from the house through the broken window.

\* \* \* \*

Lara scrambled from the room, ignoring the pain in her hands and knees created from the glass shards everywhere. Why the hell did she ever listen to him? Such bullshit. She headed into the kitchen and the cupboards below it. A trap door? What the hell? Now not only were they being shot at she had to look for a secret door. This wasn't her life, it was a bad spy movie gone wrong.

All she needed was a gun, some shoes, and a few choice herbs and she'd fucking blow up whoever the hell had the nerve to come after her. Hiding was for other people.

She opened the cabinet doors and looked inside, seeing all the normal crap you expect under someone's sink. Cleaners, towels, pet food...she paused on that one. *Why does Kane have pet food, and dog food at that? He's a damn cat.*

More broken glass crashed from the front window and she hurriedly shoved the cabinet contents to the side, feeling along the back wall for a door.

Sure enough, she felt a small depression in the wall and pushed on the exact spot, and a pull lever popped out. She yanked and it opened to a narrow tunnel behind the wall that sloped downward.

Her fear of confined spaces kicked in with a racing heart and pain in her chest. No way was she going in there; she couldn't see an exit because the tunnel went too far down. Sweat broke out on her hands as she considered her options. She was practically naked with no weapon and no magic. Damn him all to hell for not letting her arm herself with even the simplest of spells.

She thought she heard movement and the sound of crunching glass. She jumped into the cabinet but the only way to fit would be to push herself into the opening. She could do that as long as she didn't have to go inside and close the door. She got herself into position, legs first, and shut the external cabinet door.

Sweat dripped from her forehead as she waited. The dark, tiny space freaked her out and her mind raced as she edged near panic. Whatever the hell Kane was doing out there, he needed to hurry.

Steps grew closer and she doubted they were friendly. Kane would certainly have called out to her, or at the very least come straight to where she now hid. When a cabinet opened and closed on the opposite side of the kitchen she held her breath. She was trapped, unable to fight in this position. She would have to go deeper into the tunnel, at least far enough to close the hidden door.

She scooted down one inch at a time and pulled the door shut in front of her. Total blackness surrounded her and she screwed her eyes shut in order to try and forget she hung in a tunnel underneath one crazy ass cat's kitchen. She once again wondered how something like this happened to her.

She sweated profusely as the noise in the kitchen grew so loud it seemed like it banged in her head. Her pulse pounded all over her body and her skin turned slick from anxiety. She lost hold of the door handle

and slid a few more inches. Her breath caught in her throat as she continued to battle the fear.

The pull of gravity weighed heavily on her body as her arms shook with the effort of holding herself steady between the walls. She could do this, but if she stayed here much longer she would end up doing something incredibly stupid, like crying out for help. Kane had sent her here for her own safety and, for some unknown reason, she believed in him.

She took in a large, deep breath and on the slow steady exhale she let go and wiggled her body down. Surprisingly, she only fell about ten feet before going through an opening and landing on her butt. The minute her feet hit the larger room, dim lights lit the area. *Must be motion sensitive.*

She gulped in air and willed her racing heartbeat and labored breathing back to normal. Now she could see this larger tunnel continued and the lighting and space were more than adequate for her to control her fear. Still, she started to sprint down the dirt-floored tunnel in a rush to get to where it was he wanted her to go. She didn't want to spend anymore time than she had to in an indefensible area.

She considered the location of the kitchen to the proximity of his property and guessed she was running the short distance to the mountain behind his property. The North Carolina mountains were riddled with caves of all shapes and sizes, and he must have tapped into one as a private entrance or exit. He could come and go as he pleased, and anyone watching the house would never be the wiser. Clever. A man after her own heart.

Approximately a hundred yards later she entered another, much larger cave. As the spaces grew her comfort level increased. Thank God, she didn't need Kane to find her in a full-blown panic attack. Speaking of which, where exactly did he want her to go? She did a three-sixty turn in the room surveying the area and noticed a door. What the hell?

She turned the knob and was shocked to find it unlocked. *Here's hoping I've not stepped into the Twilight Zone.* More lights flickered on as the door opened, and she stepped inside, letting the heavy door shut behind her. Forget the Twilight Zone, how about the damn rabbit hole?

She stepped into another room of his house. The same colors and furniture surrounded her, except this was just one large room with a bed in one corner and a mini kitchen in the other. A hideout. He had a cushy, well-stocked hideout built into the middle of a mountain. She laughed. She'd suffered through a spray of gunfire and an almost full blown panic attack to find out that like her, her sexy as hell cat was also one paranoid son of a bitch.

Her laughter turned to giggling, the uncontrollable kind that bring tears to your eyes. The irony in all this was that if she had a home somewhere, this is exactly the kind of thing she would do: build herself a panic room. She hadn't thought of it in quite the elaborate execution.

Kane. Her mate. The words sunk in a little deeper and scared the hell out of her. Maybe in a perfect world, but this was far from ideal. He knew firsthand that she was not a nice person and he had to know that wasn't likely to change. She sat hard on the edge of the bed and put her head in her hands. What if he didn't return? What would she do then?



## Chapter Ten

Kane ran a few hundred yards in the opposite direction of the house before he circled back. He scented the intruders and didn't recognize any of them. Blood red rage filled his sight as he moved back towards the broken window, planning to attack the idiots from behind.

He couldn't fathom who thought they could attack him and his mate and live to tell about it. He'd figure that out later, right now he needed to secure the house and make sure Lara got to safety. If anything, and he meant *anything*, happened to his mate the valley here would flow red.

He spotted one of the men laid out on the ground by a clump of bushes and moved in that direction, not making a sound. When he was within thirty feet of the bastard he pounced on his back. In a burst of speed and rage he grabbed onto the back of the man's neck with his teeth, twisted, and bit down with all the force of his anger, severing the spinal cord and killing the sniper within seconds. Quick and forceful was the weapon of the cougar.

He looked down at the automatic rifle in the intruder's hand and worried all the more for Lara. If she hadn't found the door she'd be trapped inside with another gunman and he'd yet to ascertain their exact numbers. As a cougar he was much stronger than any human male, but add guns to the equation and the animal became vulnerable once again.

A low snarl formed in his chest as he shifted back and yanked the weapon from the dead guy. He hated guns and the weak humans who used them, although sometimes even for his kind they were a necessary evil. With his sharpened vision he scanned the area for additional intruders, but his heightened sense of hearing located them. At least two, if he heard the footsteps crunching against glass correctly. Strangers searched his house while he traversed the trees and shrubs surrounding it. He moved effortlessly among the brush he knew like the back of his hand.

He scanned the room beyond the broken window and found nothing. The sound of their movements came from deeper inside. Probably the kitchen. He jumped through the opening and tucked himself behind the desk, waiting for gunfire or any other attack.

A few seconds that felt like hours ticked by and Kane opted to move in closer. By now Lara should be in the caves and hopefully even found his hidey-hole, where she'd be safe...unless she left the trap door open. No, he shook his head, his woman was far too smart and ornery to do something stupid like that even under pressure.

He debated shifting back to cougar so it would be easier to move around undetected, but with enemies carrying guns, the best approach would be to fight gunfire with gunfire. It would smoke them out of his house.

Kane rushed forward through the door and against the wall of the hallway. The noises made by the assholes in the kitchen sounded louder as they slammed through door after cabinet door searching. What the hell were they looking for? They couldn't know about the tunnel, so why would they think he or Lara would be in the kitchen?

He puzzled over the situation as he crept closer to the pass through that led to his kitchen. Something about this wasn't right. If they wanted to kill him or Lara, wouldn't they be ransacking the entire house for them? The logic of their movements escaped him as he peered around the corner of the wall.

He'd been right, there were two more of them. Not willing to give them a second more to react, he shot the first one through the temple. The sound of the gun vibrated the whole house as the man fell dead in slow motion to the floor. For a moment his partner stood stunned before aiming his gun at the doorway and letting loose with an entire magazine of ammunition.

Kane fled to the other side of the room, away from the ricocheting bullets and flying bits of drywall as the asshole destroyed all the hard work he'd done on his home. If Lara wasn't in the picture that alone would be enough to warrant some serious pain to these yahoos.

When the gunfire halted, he listened for the man's heartbeat and smiled when he heard a racing pulse and labored breathing. The scent of stark fear flooded the house and Kane wondered how close the man was to peeing his pants. Given half the chance, the intruder would likely flee from his house and hunt for cover. Too late for that. He wouldn't leave his property alive.

He pressed his back against the wall and waited. His extreme patience would pay off here when the man got tired of waiting and came looking for him. *Come on, mother fucker, come to Daddy.*

His thoughts strayed to Lara again and he prayed she'd listened and done as he asked. Otherwise, when he caught up with her...

There was only one person left breathing in the house, so she had at least gotten out. Now all he had to do was get rid of this asshole and he'd find her and assure himself she was okay.

A gun muzzle poked through the opening and his body drew taut with anticipation. He quietly laid down his own gun; he wouldn't need it anymore. A few more inches and he'd be set. He counted...one...two...three...his hand snaked out faster than any human's and grabbed the barrel of the rifle and whipped the man from the kitchen, flinging him hard against the opposite wall. His head crashed into the drywall leaving, another damn dent before he crumpled to the ground unconscious.

This one had to stay alive for at least a little while longer...he needed answers. He hefted the soldier over his shoulder and retrieved some rope from a kitchen drawer. In the dining room Kane dumped him in a chair and tied him securely. With the chair placed in the middle of the room, away from any furniture or objects, if he woke before he returned there'd be no escape options.

Kane ran to his room long enough to grab and don a pair of pants before he headed outside and the other side of the mountain to a hidden trap door that led down to hopefully where Lara waited. He swept through the small hatch type door and jumped the few feet to the bottom of the cave. If anyone did find their way this far they wouldn't get in without a ladder or a rope, and by then the alarm would alert him with plenty of time to respond.

He jogged down the tunnel to the door of his private quarters. He'd unlocked the doors by remote from his office when he'd sent her here, but hadn't told her that once she got in she would be locked in without the code. There had been no time to have that discussion. He hoped to God she hadn't tried to get out.

He punched in the code and reclosed the hidden alarm panel built into the rock wall. If you didn't know it was there you'd never notice it. He opened the door cautiously, noticing the lights already on.

"Lara?" He no sooner got the door open than she launched herself at him, fists and legs flying.

"You son of a bitch, you locked me in here. I couldn't get back out and I didn't know whether you were dead or alive. What if you had needed my help? What if you had died, how the hell would I have gotten out? I could have died in here."

Her tirade continued and her anger and fear swamped him, but what broke his heart were the tears tracking down her face she probably didn't even notice.

“Baby, calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down you, motherfucking asshole.” One of her fists connected with his cheek, and he decided enough was enough. He wrestled her to the ground, grabbing both wrists in one hand and holding them above her head. Her shirt slid up, showing a luscious strip of bare flesh that distracted him from what he’d intended, which was to merely talk her down.

His semi-hard dick stood up and took notice, and the more she struggled underneath him the harder he got. His mouth moved to the bare skin of her abdomen and pressed against the soft skin around her belly button, a small kiss to the little indentation.

“I would never let you die in here. I couldn’t leave you like that.” His labored breathing made his words come out rough and growly.

“You don’t have that kind of control, Kane, anything could have happened out there.” She half-struggled underneath him. Not enough to really get away, but more than enough to have the blood rushing in his ears.

“But it didn’t. I know what I am capable of and have a keen sense for assessing a situation. That wasn’t even a challenge. In fact, whoever sent those men understand very little about cougars or weren’t trying all that hard.” He went back to her stomach and this time swirled his tongue into the indentation on her flat stomach. When her body arched upward and a low moan escaped her lips, Kane knew he’d regained the upper hand.

*Mine, all mine.*

\* \* \* \*

Lara had never been so scared and angry in her whole life, and she didn’t know what to think of it. When she’d found herself locked in she’d alternated between stark naked fear and anger that gave her the desire to hunt him down and flay him alive for his treachery. While the space was more than adequate to control her claustrophobia, the uncertainty of her rescue had driven her mad.

Now his large, flat tongue stroked and licked roughly at her skin, and she no longer cared about being mad at him. Her only clear thoughts were of fucking, of him taking her every which way to Sunday until she screamed and screamed in multiple orgasms. What had he done to her? She had cried for him and worried he wouldn’t make it back to her. This was so unlike her.

She flung her head from side to side, desperate for him to touch more of her. The knowledge that she wanted him in spite of everything between

them told her volumes more than her brain wanted to admit. When had she become attached? She would have to leave him one way or another when this was over, but it wasn't going to be easy, she would miss him.

He'd let go of her wrists and she hadn't noticed until his hands were at her waist tugging at her pants. When her pants were removed and tossed aside Kane slid his hands up the inside of her legs from ankle to thigh. She sighed at the soft sensation of his touch and whimpered when he spread her legs wide. For a minute she thought about the fact they were sprawled on the floor, but really she didn't care. As long as he didn't stop touching her she could care less where they were.

He kissed a trail up her inner thigh and her breath caught in her throat. She waited for more, knew it was coming, but still when his tongue swiped the outer lips of her pussy her hips shot off the floor. *Oh. My. God.*

"God, babe, you are so wet. Mmmmm." He purred when he stabbed back into her and licked from top to bottom, just missing her clit. She panted for breath, about to explode from that little touch. His tongue slid inside her and stroked in and out like he fucked. Her pussy flooded in readiness and she grabbed at his hair and held him in place.

The world fell away and her body spiraled out of control as his hands drew under her ass and gripped her damn tight to the point of a small bite of pain. She tugged more at his hair and he purred louder in response. "Oh, Kane. Please don't stop."

He shook his head and dove deeper, but it was when he swirled around her clit and nipped at it with his teeth that she bucked and fought underneath him all the while trying to hold his head in place. Colors and light danced in her head as she hovered on the verge of release. He swiped and swirled twice more and everything around her erupted. Her release slammed into her and she fought and writhed against him.

Her mouth opened to scream and no sound could escape, not when there was no breath left in her body. She opened her eyes in time to see Kane crawling up her body one kiss at a time. His face glistened with her juices and the hard, possessive look in his eyes made her pussy clench all over again. Her hands clutched at his skin, pulling him closer so she could get her own taste. She bent to his shoulder and licked at the soft and salty skin sitting taut over corded muscles.

An aggressive urge to bite powered through her as his musky scent mingled with her arousal to combine into an aroma that reacted as an aphrodisiac for her. No matter how many times he touched her, or even just looked at her, she doubted it would ever be enough. Her mouth ached for so much more, she bit down on his shoulder, far harder than simple fun and games. She unknowingly aimed to draw blood.

Kane snarled in her ear. "Fuck yes, baby, mark me."

Her mind reared back at what he said, but her body cared less; she wanted her mate and nothing was going to stop her now. She reached between them and unfastened his pants enough to free him. He groaned low and loud when she cupped his cock and balls, rolling them with her fingers. Her free hand pushed more at the waist of his jeans and he helped her push them out of the way. She reveled in the thick, solid heat resting in her hand, ready to please her and be pleased. She smiled at that and wondered how far he would actually go in the pursuit of their bliss.

Emotions swamped through her and she pushed them back. No, this was sex. Good, hot crazy sex that did nothing but create the pleasure they both needed.

When her fingers brushed over the slit at the tip his breath caught in his throat and he waited, not breathing. She didn't want to wait, she wanted him inside her, filling her, so she grasped him with strong fingers and guided him straight to her weeping pussy. He pulled back and she was forced to let him go.

"You can drive a man crazy like that, you know."

"You deserve it for leaving me here."

"You're mine, Lara." He grabbed her shoulders and held her down as he pushed his dick deep within her.

She wanted to say something back, but how could she with him rubbing against every sensitive spot inside her at the same time? That's what it felt like, anyway. Her skin sizzled, her clit pulsed, and her nipples hardened to tight points poking at his chest. It was heaven and hell, a feeling she didn't want to ever stop.

"I belong to no one." She panted, tilting her hips enough for him to seat himself deeper.

"Keep telling yourself that, maybe you'll believe it." He grunted and moved faster. Pain erupted in her shoulder at his death grip, and it somehow managed to combine with the pleasure to give her an out of this world experience. How else would she explain the crazy urge to beg and plead for him to never stop fucking her? Ever.

She contracted her vaginal muscles around him in quick succession until she heard the sudden intake of breath and hiss of an exhale. Oh yeah, she could give as good as she could get.

"You little witch." He withdrew from her then and she cried out in protest until he flipped her on her stomach and raised her hips in the air, opening her body to him in a different way. She shivered against his hands, a delicious sensation that arrowed straight to her clit. With no pause he thrust into her to the hilt and their mingled moans filled the room.

“So damned tight.” One hand grabbed at her waist and the other her shoulder as he moved in and out of her in rough, fast strokes. She arched her back and pushed against him, picking up his exact rhythm.

Bright burning streaks of pleasure shot through her as he touched on nerve endings she didn’t know she had. Nothing had ever been this good. The stretching, the fullness...she cried out over and over and begged him for more. When she didn’t know if she could take any more of the escalating pleasure and rough fucking she cried out. “It’s too much.”

“Do you want me to stop?” He didn’t slow, instead he raised up and angled his entry to nudge against her sweet spot every time he pushed himself in.

She shook her head and pounded her fists on the floor, grappling with the quivering of her body and the rough voice he spoke with. It rumbled along her spine, turning her on even more as she imagined him fighting the beast, the animal, from taking what he wanted more than anything. He’d told her if he bit her on her birthmark as he came in her body their DNA would magically be mingled forever, creating a bond neither of them could break for the rest of their life.

His rough tongue lapping at the curve of her back distracted her thoughts, but it was the teeth scraping her skin that sent her rocketing against him. “Harder, Kane, harder.”

His hips slammed against her ass, driving him hard and deep each time until her muscles were so taut and aching she wondered if she’d break. She squeezed her eyes closed and forgot about everything around them, only caring about the way he stretched her over and over as he tunneled inside her with every grunt and forceful move.

“Come for me, baby. Hurry before I bite you. I’m not sure how long I can hold it back. I hurt for you, Lara.”

Her orgasm snuck up and swamped her as her whole world exploded around her. Every muscle in her body clenched and she screamed long and loud. The pleasure tore at her, fracturing her until all she could do was take what he could give.

“Fuuuck!” He thrust into her one last time on his own blast of release, shuddering against her as the heat between them blazed out of control. She collapsed underneath him, utterly exhausted. Between their run in with intruders, her ordeal with being locked in and the hottest damn sex ever, she was worn out.

Kane stirred behind her and slid from her body. She missed the connection immediately. She’d instinctively known how close he’d come to mating her and part of her wished he had. Her eyelids drooped, she

needed to rest for just a minute, regain her strength. She didn't even pay attention to Kane picking her up and carrying her to the bed.

“Get some rest, baby, I'll wake you when it's time to go. And no, I won't leave you alone.”

Those were the last words she heard as she drifted into a sound sleep.



## *Chapter Eleven*

Kane paced the room restlessly, glancing over at the computer screen every few seconds. He'd booted up the security cameras in the house and had kept an eye on the asshole tied up in his dining room. About thirty minutes ago the idiot woke up and was now trying to work his way loose. Kane didn't think he could, but he itched to get over there and tear this guy apart.

"What's wrong, Kane?"

He spun around when she spoke and admired the vision she presented in his bed. Her sleep-tousled hair and mussed clothes looked sexy as hell on her, and he wanted to jump into bed with her and not leave this damned room until he got her out of his system. He doubted, though, that would ever happen. Like it or not, they were mates. They'd tasted each other, and from this point forward no other would be enough, whether they mated completely or not.

Somehow she'd managed to get inside him, and he wanted her a lot more than science explained.

"Nothing." His answer sounded gruff even to his own ears, but he was no longer a patient man when it came to her safety, and the feelings that swirled inside him created more guilt than he expected. He had family loyalties to consider.

"You suck at lying." She crawled from the bed and moved next to him, and he automatically folded her in his arms.

"What the hell have you done to me?" he sighed into her hair.

"You? What about me? This is so fucked up I don't know what to do. I'm even losing sight of myself."

He looked at the computer screen from the corner of his eyes, but Lara caught him.

"What the hell?" She hurried over to the screen at the image of the idiot struggling against his bonds, grunting to get loose."

"Holy shit, why didn't you tell me? We need to get over there, why did you let me sleep?" She rushed around looking for the rest of her clothes. Kane found her enthusiasm for a fight a little scary as well as

arousing. One minute she was soft and sexy, begging to come for him, and the next she was back to hell on wheels.

With her next pass in front of him he grabbed her around the waist and yanked her against him. She yelped but the protest died on her lips when he took possession of her mouth with plans to kiss her senseless. She brought her hand up presumably to hit him or something equally annoying and he grabbed it before she could connect.

“Damn, woman, save your aggression for the bed.”

“This is serious, Kane, we have to get over there before he escapes.”

“Hon, he isn’t going anywhere. And you’re right, this attacking me all the time thing is serious and should be reconsidered.”

She stilled and looked down to meet his gaze. She cocked her head to one side as if assessing him, then broke out into roaring laughter. Not liking the sense he got of her making fun of him, he let go and she slipped to the floor, landing on her butt.

“Ow, what’d you do that for?” Her hand rubbed her behind.

“You need to learn some respect.”

“Give me a break.” She stood, brushing off her backside, and finished throwing on her clothes. “So, are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

“Pretty obvious, isn’t it? There were three men who invaded my property, now there is one. I doubt he can tell us anything but I figured it was worth a shot.”

“How long has he been tied up like that? Are you sure it’s okay to leave him alone this long?”

He loved how her mind worked. Methodical and analytical. She was likely processing all the possible scenarios. No wonder she’d been able to live off the grid for so long. Apparently she was a lot smarter than she let on. Now the only question was *how do I harness that intelligence for good things?*

“Do you have an interrogation plan?”

Now it was his turn to laugh at her but he thought better of it and bit down on his lips to hold it in. He didn’t want to waste anymore time fighting with her. If they did, there would be sex involved. Hot, sweaty, rough sex, to be exact. His cock stirred in his pants and he inwardly groaned as he turned away from her.

\* \* \* \*

He and Lara stood side-by-side, looking at the idiot who invaded his home. In his effort to get loose he’d landed on his side, chair and all. He’d started out by yelling and cussing at them the moment they walked into

the room, but after ten seconds with Lara and the guy whimpered like a baby.

They looked at each other and Lara shrugged. He'd managed to keep the dumb one alive. In fact, how the man had even been chosen for a job like this was beyond him. Someone out there was either fucking stupid as hell or just toying with them. He'd vote for the latter if his instincts were correct, which they usually were.

"What would you like to tell us?"

His intruder looked at Kane without saying a word, but he didn't have to. The scent of his fear was so strong it made Kane somewhat nauseous.

"I ain't telling you shit."

"Because you've had so much fun being tied up in my house, you want more?"

"Fuck you."

Lara swung and punched the guy, connecting with his nose. The distinct sound of bone breaking sounded and blood gushed from his face.

"Jeez, woman, what the hell?"

"What? You think he's gonna just tell you?"

The man just sat there wailing in pain. So much for someone's tough soldiers. Kane grabbed him by the hair and pulled him and his chair from the ground with one arm. His eyes bugged out when Kane's teeth lengthened, not to mention he'd let his eyes shift, too. A partial shift could scare the shit out of an unknowing human.

"I'd suggest you tell him what he wants before he gives up on you and just snaps your neck." Lara sounded irritated and bored.

"I-I don't know nuthin'."

"You don't know who hired you to kill one of us? Oh, and by the way, which one were you trying to kill?"

His eyes quickly averted to Lara before he could stop himself from giving away the target. Kane lost control when the rage surged through him and, without thinking, he hurled the man against the wall.

The chair crushed and splintered into several pieces, loosening the ropes that held the prisoner. Kane started toward him, tired of playing with his prey. The man needed to know the one thing you don't do is try to hurt a cougar's mate. Big mistake.

Lara rushed in front of him and placed her hand on his chest, pushing at him to retreat. "Now who's going overboard?" When he pushed forward she grabbed his head and forced him to look at her. "Stay right there. I can't have you killing him before I'm done talking to him."

She approached the intruder and threw the mangled pieces of chair out of the way. In just a few seconds she grabbed up the loose rope and hogtied the man's wrists to his feet. Clearly she'd done this before.

"You wanted to kill me, huh? Tsk tsk tsk. Should have brought a much bigger gun." She punched him again, this time to the kidneys in his back. "Now tell us who hired you and why."

"I have no idea why someone wants you dead, other than the fact that you're a crazy psycho bitch."

Kane bit his lip to keep from laughing out loud. This guy was thicker than he'd thought. *Ohh boy.*

Lara grabbed him by the hair and jerked his head back and up eye level to where she stood. Her face scrunched into an angry snarl. "I'm your only chance at salvation here, so unless you want me to turn you over to the likes of the big growly guy, you'd better start talking."

To emphasis her words he started a deep growl from his chest, showing his teeth again for good measure. The look on the guy's face was priceless, and under different circumstances Kane would have roared with laughter.

"I'm serious about not knowing why someone hired me; it's not the kind of thing we ask." He wheezed out between the blood still trickling from his broken and mangled nose to the death grip Lara maintained on his head.

"Let's say I believe you, and we move on. Who hired you?"

"Man said his name was Richard Smith. Big guy like your friend there, black hair, dark eyes. Not exactly the friendly or talkative type."

Lara let go of his hair and his head slammed to the floor where the man howled again in agony. "What do you want to do with him now, Kane?"

He wanted to kill the man. Rip out his throat and throw his carcass in the woods for the wildlife, but reluctantly he admitted it probably wasn't the best course of action at this point. He and Lara already had enough negative council attention focused their way, and with two deaths to explain, this one would not be viewed the same. He was tied and beaten. No way to make that look like a decent self defense, home invasion type execution.

"We've got people to handle situations like this. Killing humans is always a rather precarious thing to do. I'm going to have to call it in and then we have to leave before the cleaners arrive."

"He doesn't deserve your sympathy."

"I have none." He realized how cold and angry he sounded, but right now he couldn't care less. He looked around at the shambles his cabin had

become and grappled again with his rage. He walked into the other room and flipped open his cell phone to make the call.

\* \* \* \*

Lara walked to the back of the house to her room. She needed to change out of the clothes that were now spattered with blood. She entered the bathroom and stripped down to her underwear, eager to clean up. She pushed her sore hands under the warm water of the faucet and looked at herself in the mirror.

Her hair stuck up in several places and her eyes still had a wild and hard look to them. She sucked in several deep breaths, searching for her calm center. This situation was out of hand and she didn't know how to take it back. Never in her life had she been so turned upside down and inside out—at least, not since her mother's death.

There were many times in her past where she'd gotten a real thrill from sex and danger, but this time it seemed so much more. More at stake than ever before: her life, and if not that, then certainly her heart. She needed to work some magic, without it for so long she felt weak and naked all the time. If they were attacked again she needed to be able to defend herself.

She wiggled into a fresh pair of jeans and a dusky violet tank top that matched the color of her eyes. Digging further into her bag, she pulled out a brush, hair band, and some gloss. The least she could do was make herself feel like a woman, for even a little while, instead of just the cold bitch she had truly become.

"You about ready to leave?" He'd snuck up behind her without a sound, a trick quickly becoming a habit. When his gaze raked over her from head to toe she couldn't stop the beading of her nipples or the heat that built in her pussy.

His nostrils flared as he sniffed the air. "You're killing me, babe. We don't have much time before the team arrives, we need to get out."

"Then let's go." She gathered up her travel bag and started out the door.

"Anything in particular you would like to do today? We've got some time to kill."

"You mean besides hunt down the attacker? Yeah, actually I do." She turned back to face him, falling into the warmth she saw in his eyes. "I need my magic, Kane, without it I'm weak and vulnerable. Something I do not know how to handle right now, not here under these circumstances."

He said nothing right away, but lifted his finger to stroke down her cheek. "You don't have to be scared. I won't let anything happen to you."

She jerked from his touch. "I'm not scared. I can take care of myself just fine, but with magic I'm stronger and it's much easier to control a situation. Please..."

He probably had no idea what it took for her to ask him this, to be at his mercy for something as simple as her birthright.

"What do you need?"

She blinked up at him, unsure if she heard him correctly. As she rattled off the list of various elements required for a variety of amulets, he grabbed her hand and led her through the kitchen to the back door.

"Normally I would say out here in the country you'd be hard pressed to find some of those items, but it just so happens I know someone who might be able to help. She lives about an hour south of here, so it won't take us long to get there." He stopped and stared at her car. "Am I driving or are you?"

"I am, of course."

He laughed and for the first time that day, she truly relaxed. She smiled back at him as he tossed the keys to her. "Fine, but don't get any ideas."

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

## *Chapter Twelve*

True to his word, an hour later he directed her off the main road about ten miles outside of a no-name town onto a barely there dirt road. He'd called ahead and told the woman what they needed and she said she'd leave a box out on the porch. He explained she was an intensely private woman and rarely allowed anyone to see her in person.

She pulled her car into an overgrown driveway in front of what could only be described as a shack. Despite her knowledge to the contrary about what to expect from witches, she imagined the stereotypical hunched back old lady living out here alone, probably hideous and afraid to let anyone see her. The kind of things kids' nightmares are made of.

Kane jumped out of the car and pulled some money out of his pocket and stuffed it through the slot on the door before grabbing up the box and carrying it back to the car.

"All set."

"This place creeps me out. Reminds me of those stupid childhood tales that adults used to scare kids into staying out of trouble."

He cocked his brow in question, which she ignored. Not going there.

"She's really a nice woman, just a complete recluse, afraid to come out of her house. Everything she gave us is either homegrown or homemade. It's amazing what you can do these days with Amazon delivery."

"Oh, don't I know." Lara threw the car into reverse and whipped the car back around. She couldn't get away from this bad vibe house fast enough. "Where to now?"

"You hungry?"

"I could eat."

"How about a picnic?"

She stared at him for a second and burst into a fit of giggles. Her laughter came so fast and hard it brought tears to her eyes.

"What's so damn funny about a picnic?"

"No-nothing." She managed around the uncontrollable laughter. He directed her to a mom and pop diner where he grabbed some take out, and then led her to a nearby overlook point just off the Blue Ridge Parkway.

They followed a trail in silence to a small waterfall, like many that dotted the area.

“This is nice.” She did love the mountains and always enjoyed every minute she could spend outdoors.

“Oh, this is nothing, follow me.”

He pulled her through the brush where there was no path and dragged her past trees and bushes that scraped at her arms.

“I certainly hope where we’re headed is worth it.” He stepped aside and let her pass as they walked out of the trees and into a small clearing. The loud roaring she’d thought was from the fall they’d passed instead came from a humongous and full waterfall in front of her. The heavy water crashed into a crystal clear pool in front of them.

“Wow.”

“I thought you might like it.”

She turned around in a slow circle and took in everything. The green trees, blue sky, even the birds she heard in the distance. With the sun shining down on her face, she could temporarily forget about everything else and enjoy some time with Kane.

“Thank you.”

He carefully set the bags of food down on a tree stump and stalked toward her. The look in his eyes told her he wasn’t thinking about the beauty of nature anymore.

“I thought you were hungry.”

“I am. But for something much better than burgers.”

“I don’t know, big juicy burgers are pretty good.” She took a few steps back, unsteady on her feet. His hungry look made her pussy squeeze and her breath catch in her throat. His nearly one-track mind matched her own as she thought about sinking down onto his cock, stretched and filled to capacity.

“Again?” she asked.

Kane threw her a wicked grin. “Always.”

“Are all cougars like this? Always looking for more sex?”

“Cougars do have a high sex drive, but not usually for just one person. We are more likely to choose multiple partners.”

“You need more than one woman?” She didn’t like the sound of that.

“Right now I need you and only you.”

Emotion squeezed in her chest on his statement. What did he mean by that? Right now this minute? Or more...

Her own desire had risen off the chart as her panties soaked. When she ran out of backing up room, she waited, barely breathing. “Kane.”



“Take off your clothes, unless you want me to rip them off,” he growled.

Lara didn’t take orders well, yet his demand weakened her and she did exactly as he asked. She jerked her shirt and pants from her body and tossed them to the grass. With her bra and panties still on, Kane cocked his brow. She reached behind her back and unlatched her bra and slowly uncovered full, aching breasts. She loved the way his eyes shone dark and hot, and the breath whooshed from his lungs on a sigh.

Lara hooked her thumbs inside the fabric of her panties and teased him with a quick shot of the trimmed dark hair covering her pussy. She heard the growl and her head snapped up to meet his gaze. For a minute neither of them spoke and she didn’t even breathe. The look of lust and desire he gave her was like a punch to her heart, not to mention the pulsing of her clit from standing near him, knowing he would soon be inside her.

“You’re beautiful.” He touched her cheek with the pad of his finger and trailed it down her jaw and neck to the bare skin of her shoulders, but when that soft touch traced under and around her breast, she pushed him backwards and rushed the panties down her legs and tossed them to the side.

She needed him now.

Lara launched her body onto his and hooked her feet around his waist. Her sudden move caught him off guard and he pitched forward with nothing to break his fall as they tumbled together into the cool water from the fall.

His arms squeezed around her tight as he pulled her under the water and then back to the surface.

She shook the water from her face and head and giggled at the two of them soaked and sputtering. “You got your clothes wet.”

“So?” He shucked his clothes and tossed them a few feet to the shore, giving her enough time to swim away from him and underneath the waterfall. On the other side the rushing sound of water echoed against the cliff behind it. She stuck her face into the rush of water and laughed more at the sensation of cold water crashing over her. Lost in the fun of playing, she didn’t see Kane swim over and scoop her up around the legs.

“Hey, I was having fun.”

“I have another idea for having fun.”

He laid her out on the ledge that jutted from the cliff, brushing her legs and arms as he moved to lie next to her. Goosebumps erupted all over her body from the combination of cool air and his delectable touch. His fingers swirled through and curled into the hair above her sex and tugged,

just enough for a sting of pain. Wetness coated her lower lips, readying her for more.

“So far I like your ideas.”

“I figured you would.” Kane tipped his head toward one breast and nipped at the skin and exposed nipple.

She jolted at the sensation, and moaned deep in her throat. Her body screamed for her to do something. Lying here waiting might kill her if he didn’t hurry it up. To keep her own sanity, she reached between his legs and cupped his balls, rolling them in her hands and squeezing.

“You are such a bad girl.”

“I think you like that about me.” Her hands moved to grasp the thick cock that rested against his leg. Mmm. The heat. The solid length. Her head lolled to the side as she focused on the ecstasy she held in her hand.

“Please...”

He rose over her. “Please what?”

“Just please.”

“No way, babe. It’s not that easy.” He nudged her legs apart with his thigh and settled between them.

“You aim to torture me?” Her breath came in hard pants now as her whole body buzzed with the ache for him to fuck her.

“Just until you beg.” The sharp point of his shifted teeth scraped against the sensitive skin of her inner thigh, and she thought she would come without him ever touching her pussy.

Her limbs trembled and jerked with every pass of his rough tongue and sharp teeth until she was on the edge of the cliff, only in need of a small push. Her lungs fought for air under her labored breathing.

“Do you just play with your food, too, instead of eating it?”

“You are too impatient. Are you like this about everything?” His fingers delved between her slick folds to stroke and fondle some more. “You have such a pretty pink pussy.”

“Aahh, please, Kane...you’re driving me crazy.”

Two fingers plunged inside her then, rubbing against all the nerves hidden there. Yes, this is what she wanted. Rough and fast. When his lips closed over her hard little bud she jerked violently but his hand on her thigh steadied her.

Her nerve endings were on fire and she couldn’t control a thing. Not how she felt, not her pleasure, nor his. This helplessness continued to drive her toward madness every time he did this. She writhed against his mouth but pushed against his shoulders. A total contradiction in need.

Kane shifted between her legs. “You’re one stubborn woman.” He pressed into her and she lost focus on everything around her as he

stretched and filled her again. Working in and out, he hit every damn spot she had as she rocked her hips in rhythm. Already her orgasm was close, close enough to reach for it, if he would just...

"You're killing me," she whimpered. "No one likes a tease."

He kissed her then, his mouth sucking at her lower lip as he nibbled his way down while the head of his cock bumped against the most sensitive tissues he could find, and he could find a lot. "I'm not teasing you, baby, just pleasuring you. Nice and slow."

He was right about the pleasure. Her system raced with the overload of sensations, threatening to erupt into an explosive orgasm. The water from the swim still coated their skin, making it easy for Kane to slide across her flesh. His tight abs rocked against her soft, rounded belly. In fact, everything she felt seemed magnified somehow, creating a stupor of unadulterated bliss.

When she really didn't think she could take it anymore, and when she'd begun peeling thin strips of skin from Kane's back and arms he picked up the pace, fucking her hard and deep. When her release broke she fell under and let it all take over, her only care for more. The screams that tore from her throat vibrated around them but were muffled by the sound of the water crashing around them. His orgasm rocketed into her then, sending a blast of heat to her womb that reignited her own fire. Out of breath and wrung out from the experience, she collapsed underneath him.

"Kane, we are going to kill each other if we keep this up," she mumbled.

"You know you like it," he teased.

She more than liked it. She damn well needed him now. More than she'd ever needed anyone in her life and it scared the hell out of her. What would happen to her when they separated? Would she recover? She didn't want to end up like the witch they'd visited today, alone and afraid to even leave the house. Is that what happens to people when they let their guard down and depended on someone else?

No one stayed forever, and then what?

\* \* \* \*

A subtle movement in the corner of his eye and a low growl in his head caught Kane's attention as he sprang from Lara's warm embrace. "Stay here," he muttered before diving under the water to find out who or what had him on edge.

Resurfacing, he turned a three-sixty, scanning the area when he went still and sucked in his breath. A cougar stood on the shoreline right next to

where they'd left their clothes. Another shifter, he was certain, because it was black like him.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he called out to his brother.

He watched the cougar shift and pangs of regret filled him at the sight of Malcolm. Having both of his brothers shunned from the clan and away all the time bothered him a lot, but at least Lucas had his mate. Malcolm, on the other hand, had no kin to be with and had grown increasingly belligerent. There was talk that he might even turn feral sometime soon.

"I'd ask you the same, brother, aren't you kind of far away from clan borders?"

"I have my reasons." Water whooshed and splashed behind him as he heard the distinctive signs of Lara not following his orders, as usual. Damn woman.

"What the fuck is this?" Malcolm's face turned red with rage at the sight of Lara.

*Why couldn't she listen?*

Kane snarled at his brother, which tore his attention away from her and back to him. "What do you want, Malcolm?"

"Well, right now I'm dying to know if that bitch is using sex with my baby brother just like she did with me."

Kane's thoughts went cold and still just like his body. "Careful what you say here." He didn't know where Malcolm was going with this, but the tingling along his spine told him it wasn't going to be good. He already knew his mate had a past with his brother, but throwing it in his face was a very bad idea.

"What, you don't know?" He laughed. "That's just priceless."

"Shut up, Malcolm, you don't know what you're talking about." Lara's voice had a hard and angry edge to it, chilling him.

"You deserve to be busted, you little witch. Your obsession with revenge has gone too far when you start fucking all of us to get close. You're not strong enough to take us down, when are you going to face that and move on? It's time for you to get out of our lives."

"You son of a bitch!" She moved so fast she startled Kane as she flew by him, launching herself at Malcolm.

Thank God for lightning fast reflexes. He grabbed Lara's arm and pulled her back, shoving her behind him as he wrestled his brother to the ground. The sound of snarls filled his ears as they rolled onto the ground, shifting as they fell.

Long teeth sank into his fur as Malcolm tried to get a grip on the back of his neck. Kane flipped his brother, swiping his extended claws across the big cat's jaw. He wouldn't be taken down that easy. Lara yelled at

them both from somewhere in the distance, but neither of them paid any attention; if they let their guard down there was a good chance one would be bested by the other, and Kane sure as hell wasn't going to be beat down by his bastard brother.

They flipped and fought and bit at each other before finally rolling away. The brothers circled, each trying to guess what the other would do when Lara jumped in between the two of them. Not a very smart idea when they continued to snarl and swipe at each other every time one of them had a shot.

"Enough. You two are acting like children. So what if I had sex with your brother, I didn't even know you back then. You knew my agenda; it's not as if we didn't talk about it. And you!" She whirled in the direction of Malcolm and he wondered how she knew to tell the two of them apart. "Why are you here? Because of me? Do you want a piece of me, too? If so, you're going to have to get in line."

Malcolm shifted, not bothering to cover his nudity. "Spare me the theatrics, we both know better."

Kane shifted back then, seeing his human legs instead of the cougar's. Bones moved effortlessly and he stood to his full height. Lara and Malcolm failed to notice him as he walked back to his clothes and put them on. He'd heard enough and tuned them out, not needing to know more. She'd lied to him all along, that seemed apparent.

Dressed, he glanced at Lara to see her yelling at his brother. Her still naked breasts jiggled and Malcolm looked like he wasn't listening to a word she said. Instead he recognized the look of lust and the feral grin on his face—that of a predator considering his prey, not to mention the hard on he was now sporting. Seemed like with Malcolm, fighting with his mate turned him on, too.

For the first time in his life, Kane didn't want to share what was his and bitch or not, she was his. At the very least, until the tribunal, so he couldn't let her run off with Malcolm if that's what she wanted.

Too busy dressing down his brother, she didn't hear him come up behind her, and when he grabbed her around the waist and hauled her off her feet she snarled at him.

"Let me go. I don't need your help."

"That's obvious, sugar. But, like it or not, you're my responsibility until the council decides your fate. So get your clothes on, we're going home." He dropped her on her butt at her clothes and stalked back to his brother and the fight he was dying to finish.

"She's bad news, Kane. If you trust her she'll turn on you."

“You think I don’t know that? All that matters right now is that she is not your concern, so if you have a reason for being here then say it. Otherwise, get the hell out of here.”

Malcolm stood still and watched him. Neither broke eye contact until eventually Malcolm shook his head and looked over his shoulder to where Lara was.

“I came here to warn you, but it’s obvious you won’t listen. Mark my words, you’ll be sorry about this.”

“Why is that? You planning something?”

He rolled his eyes and shifted back to cougar. Crouching on his hind legs, he sprang towards a rock outcropping twenty feet away and, with one last look back, disappeared to the other side. Kane fought instincts to go after him, not knowing what Lara would do if he left her alone. Now that she’d been outed would she plan to run? He reluctantly turned away from the direction Malcolm had gone and decided to grab Lara and go.

To his shock she stood right behind him, a feat she’d managed without him hearing her approach. She looked upset, maybe even frightened, which did nothing to diminish her beauty. She was well suited to the backdrop of nature. A breeze from the north side of the waterfall kicked up and blew through her raven hair, carrying her scent to him then. That sweet musk in the outdoors and...his head jerked...her arousal.

*What the fuck? Who?*

He reeled with the implications that fighting with his brother had not only aroused Malcolm but her as well. White-hot rage rushed through him as she stood looking at him with her sad, probably fake emotion. This possessiveness he felt around her seemed so at odds with his nature. Why not share her? It’s not as if he hadn’t done it plenty in the past. But, the thought of Malcolm ever touching her again made him want to kill something. A low growl rumbled from his chest.

“What?” She looked at him curiously.

“We need to get out of here,” he managed through gritted teeth. Anger seethed through him and he was sorely tempted to show her exactly how animal he could be. But right now he had is animal tethered, although barely. If he took her now, he would complete the mating ritual...and then what? Would he have to accept the possibility of her death sentence or lose everything he’d ever held dear?

He couldn’t think straight like this. He needed to get away from here where all he could smell was her and Malcolm, something he wouldn’t hold in for much longer.

“Where are we going now?”

“Home.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Lara climbed the steps to Kane's backdoor, trepidation enveloping her as she walked. Kane hadn't spoken two words to her the entire trip back and had refused to allow her to drive her own car. She wanted to fight him, boy did she, but something about that last look he raked over her gave her second thoughts. He looked every inch on the edge and she had a feeling she didn't want to know what the other side looked like.

So when they arrived back at this house, she grabbed the bag from the crazy witch and headed straight for the kitchen. She had to do something, anything to keep herself busy. Seeing Malcolm again had reminded her of everything she'd done and planned to do to the Gunn clan and now her mission was muddled with lies and half truths, none of which seemed to be answered by anyone around here.

She should have known things were going far too easily between her and Kane. She'd even begun to adjust to the fact that they were mates despite knowing they couldn't act on it. She no longer wanted to kill him, and that was a huge step in her mind.

Leave it to Malcolm to fuck all that up. His accusations could have just as easily been right as wrong if he'd encountered her a couple of weeks ago. She'd always been willing to use any weapon she had to break through to her goals, and if that meant sex then so be it.

Now Kane wasn't speaking to her, and for some reason that hurt. He'd obviously taken Malcolm's accusations to heart and parcel without even giving her a chance to explain. She reached into the cabinet below the stove and grabbed several pots and pans. *Whatever*. If that's what he wanted to believe then she would do what was best for her, and that was to protect herself against the next attack—and she knew there would be a next one. These big cats were damn vicious when they were crossed and apparently didn't take well to having the enemy on their own land, no matter the reason.

She dumped the bag contents on the counter and headed for her room for her amulets. She could power up a supply of them and show these people that Lara Monroe could take care of herself against anyone.

Back in the kitchen, she noticed the quiet. She looked around the house for Kane, wondering if he'd even come in with her. All the mess from the gunfight had been cleared and repaired. She looked at the walls where the bastard's head had been smashed and there wasn't a single sign of damage. She rubbed the spot and wet paint smeared on her fingers. Well, they were at least thorough if nothing else.

In Kane's study the big plate glass window had been repaired, and she could see the orange and yellow glow of the setting sun. All the rooms in the house except for the kitchen were shadowed from the coming darkness, and there was no sign of Kane. He must have decided on a run or maybe he was checking out the cave. He probably did need to make sure everything was locked back up and reset to where he'd left it before she'd gotten a little crazy in there, waiting for him. She shrugged. Well, he shouldn't have locked her in. He may not know about her fears, but what woman relished being locked in a room in the belly of a cave for who knows how long?

She padded along the plush carpeting back to the kitchen, glad that his beautiful home had been put back to right. It was something, at least, and obviously his clan cared for him a lot to move so fast and thoroughly to clean up the mess. That gave her even more to consider as she began putting ingredients in the pot of boiling water. What would happen to that love and acceptance if she stayed here much longer? She would never be accepted, and the fact that his mate was an outsider would always be a problem.

When the pot on the stove began to bubble and the froth threatened to spill over, she turned off the heat and grabbed her amulets, dipping them in the solution one at a time. Leaving them to energize for a while, she grabbed another saucepan and mixed up a different batch. Nothing like a little back up firepower in a girl's arsenal to make her feel even more secure.

Hours later, all of her work done and the kitchen set back to the way she found it, she marveled at the time and the fact that Kane had still not returned. She wandered into the living room with a mug of hot tea and took a seat on one of the plush suede chairs, sinking her tired and sore body into the cushions. It's amazing how sore some good fucking could leave you, and Kane knew how to love a woman right.

The warm liquid felt so good and aided her in releasing some of the pent up stress she'd dealt with all day. Having the magic to use also helped. She wouldn't be quite so vulnerable. Thanks to Kane.

She noticed the shift in the air of the house the minute he came through the door. Working spells all day left her more in tune with the



nature and energy of his house. She worried her bottom lip with her teeth and sucked it in, nervous about facing him and what would likely still be an angry man. Even after considering her options all day long, indecision ate at her when it came to her feelings toward him. He had reasons to be mad; some of what Malcolm accused her of was true. But, he knew that going in, or at least most of it.

When she heard the shower in the back of the house turn on, she relaxed back into her chair.

*This is ridiculous. We can't hide from this.*

She hopped up and placed her mug on the table before heading to the master suite. Maybe there was a chance they could still talk this out. She pushed open the cracked door of his room and entered into the dark, masculine bedroom that Kane lived in.

This room was far different from the rest of the house and the complete opposite of her own room. Instead of the combination of light and dark elements, everything was dark here. Dark walls, dark wood, even chocolate brown covered the bed, which looked damned inviting in king size. The glint of silver on the headboard caught her eye and she inhaled sharply. Was that...?

She moved closer, and sure enough there were silver handcuffs attached to the bed. Interesting...and something she hadn't expected although she wasn't sure why. All three brothers struck her as sexually adventurous and a little bit deviant, but damn. She felt a rush of liquid dampen her panties as she imagined Kane cuffing her to his bed, his prisoner. As long as he didn't leave and abandon her.

*But everyone leaves.*

She glanced around the rest of the room wondering what other secrets might be hidden there. Were there other kinks he kept hidden from her? There was a door on the opposite side of the room across from the bed, a closet she would presume, and her fingers literally itched to go in and see what she would find.

She took a few steps towards the door and stopped to listen—the shower was still running. She could take a quick peek and he would never know. A few more steps and sweat broke out on her palms. *What the hell is wrong with me?* She rubbed her hands on her pants. *It's not like I'm going to find a dead body in there or anything.*

When she reached the door, she placed one hand on the cool, smooth wood and the other on the knob. That would help keep it quiet in case it creaked when she pulled it open. She placed her forehead against it, contemplating what to do. It didn't seem right to pry through his private space, but how often in life did Lara do what anyone else thought she

should? If you want to know something about someone you do whatever you have to do to find out.

*Fuck it.* She twisted the knob and started to ease it open when two arms appeared alongside of hers and a hard male body pressed up against her backside, closing the door and trapping her against the wood.

*Kane.*

“Where are you going, sugar?” His voice rumbled low and menacing in her ear. He sounded different.

“Why are you calling me sugar now?”

“It’s a term of endearment here in the south, I’m sure you’ve heard it before.”

“Yeah, but not from you, and you didn’t start saying that until you got upset.” His finger trailed along her arm, distracting her immensely.

“Should I be upset?”

“Stop it, Kane. If you have something you want to say just say it.” Already her thoughts of Malcolm and Kane fighting and the ugly things that were said faded as he caressed her. Instead she thought about his hard abs pressed against her back and the breadth of his cock lodging against her ass through her thin pants.

“Why are you in here? Don’t you know it’s dangerous to enter a den?”

“I thought that applied to wild cats.”

He purred then, right against her throat as he nibbled on her neck and ears. “And you don’t think I’m wild?”

“Uh huh.” She pressed back into his arms, unable to stop herself from wanting to crawl all over him. How did he do that to her? Melt her into a compliance that made her willing to give him anything.

“Are you spying on me?”

“You were in the shower, I was curious about your room. I saw—saw the handcuffs on the bed.”

He grabbed her wrists then and pulled them behind her back and pushed her flush against the smooth surface of the door. Her panties moistened more from the fresh flow of her arousal. “Did that turn you on, sugar?”

“I’m not your sugar.”

“Aren’t you? You know I can tell everything about you just by your scent. Your fear, your anger, your arousal...”

She moaned. A faint thought of denying him flitted through her mind, but what was the point? He knew she was wet and ready for him just this easy.

His grip tightened on her wrists and his free hand slipped into the front waistband of her pants.

“You should wear skirts, makes for easier access.”

She squirmed against his hand when his fingers slid through her curls and glanced over her clit on the way to her wet entrance.

“Spread you legs for me, Lara.”

She instantly obeyed, trembling a little as she did. A wicked lust for this man washed over her as he continued to stroke her slick folds. She fought for breath as she let her forehead rest against the cool wood of the door, waiting for whatever he wanted next. This feeling of uncertain vulnerability should have worried her, especially considering how angry he'd been, but somehow she sensed that he suffered as much as she did when they tried to deny this connection.

“Mmm, I love how wet you get for me, makes me want to feast on you for days. It's enough to drive a man into a frenzy.” His breath feathered hot and fast at her ear, sending chills from her head to her toes.

His fingers continued to brush quickly across her clit, enough to give her a jolt every time he did, but nowhere near what he knew she needed. Her pussy ached for him to fill her, to stroke her every which way he could until she begged and screamed for more.

When two of his fingers curled inside her she wanted to burst from his arms with the force of the sudden electric sensations coursing through her. “Oh, God. Kane.” She screwed her eyes shut, hoping to control herself, gain a little equilibrium before she collapsed on the floor in front of him.

“Do you want me, sugar? Or do you want me to stop?”

She shook her head almost violently. “Please. Don't. Stop.”

He chuckled in her ear, a rumbling sound that vibrated straight to her clit—it pulsed in eager anticipation. Her hips bucked against his hand and he removed his fingers, making her whimper with the cold loss.

He tugged at her arms and pulled her back a little. He released her wrists. “Take off your shirt and bra.” She quickly whipped her shirt and sports bra over her head and stood still in front of him, waiting and taking in his bronzed, naked skin with his thick erection jutting from his hips. He held a small tube of lube in his hand and she eyed him curiously as he began to put some on his fingers. “Now your pants.”

She met his gaze, grabbed at her waistband, and wiggled her pants over her hips and swept them down her legs, kicking them across the room. Without waiting, he flipped her back around to face away from him and gripped her wrists behind her back again and pushed her slightly forward at the waist. She wiggled her body forward as best she could, considering he held her arms tight in his hand, not letting her move any

way he didn't want her to. He was obviously making sure she knew exactly who was in control, but right now she didn't care just so long as he quit teasing her.

His rough-skinned hand covered her ass, caressing in a small circular pattern before letting his fingers slip between the cheeks, pressing his slick fingers to her tight rear opening. Her breath caught in her throat as his finger stretched the tight ring of muscles.

"I want your ass. I'm going to sink in one slow inch at a time until you scream and beg for more."

Lara let the dark pleasure course through her veins as he pressed in deeper, not hearing anything else he said. Her thoughts became lost in the incredible sensation of the wicked. She'd already forgotten her anger and hurt feelings from earlier all for the sake of this moment.

"Do you like that, sugar?"

Of course she did. How could he not know that about her by now? That the more he pushed her sexual boundaries the more she craved from him? What others called forbidden she called heaven. Lara's body trembled, shaking with each new plunge of his finger until she cried out in frustration. How long would he make her hang on the ledge? Cool sweat broke out on her body as her instincts drove her to push back against him. "Please, Kane. Please."

\* \* \* \*

God, he loved her like this, hovering on the edge of a mind numbing orgasm and begging for her release. It had to be the hottest damn thing he'd seen in his life, and he'd seen plenty. But her ass gripping tight on his finger as the words he'd needed to hear trembled from her lips made his cock swell, leaving him with a hard-on the likes of which he hadn't experienced before, and he was about to fill her with it.

He released her wrists then and she grabbed for the wall to steady herself. When he'd figured out she was in his room he'd thought to teach her a lesson. She needed to know that he couldn't be controlled by something so simple as sex just to get what she wanted from him, yet here he was going against his own plan to bring her to the cliff of an orgasm and then walk away.

Walking away wasn't an option, and clearly it never would be for either of them. So how did he get past her obvious betrayal, back to where he'd thought they'd been headed before his pain in the ass brother had shown up? Another question he had to ask her when he didn't have his dick buried in her and could think straight.

He stood there for a minute, looking at how beautiful she was. She had a round and lush butt, just as he liked them, and as he took her in, his hunger built to a higher, more impossible crest. He couldn't wait any longer, he had to fuck her.

Grabbing up the lube he'd dropped at his feet, he squeezed some more on his fingers. He slid one finger back inside and added a second right away with no problem. She opened beautifully and he couldn't wait to see her take his dick. The little whimpers she made when she was aroused tore at his control as he removed his fingers and replaced them with the tip of his cock.

"Tell me, Lara. Tell me how much you want this from me."

"Do it already!"

"Do you want me as mate?" He didn't care right now if his demands were fair; all that mattered was her admittance. He wanted to hear her say it.

"Kane, please."

"Not until you tell me." He wasn't about to let her wiggle out of it.

"I want you!" she screamed.

He pushed forward and her back bowed at his entry and her cry filled the room around them. He gripped her hips and dug in with his feet forcing himself to take this slow and easy, unwilling to hurt her. The heat of her flesh surrounding him was like liquid fire, and sweat ran in rivulets down his face and back as he still did his best to hold onto that little thread of humanity that held back the animal.

"More, Kane. Hurry."

"I don't want to hurt you, baby."

"I don't care. You need to fuck me now!"

The tether broke on her last cry and he surged forward, buried to the hilt. With the scent of her pussy filling his senses and the entire room, as well as the tight grip she flexed and released around his dick, he was forced to free the cougar. A snarl twisted his lips as he surged forward again and again, covering her body with his own. His eye teeth descended and the cries of his mate begging him not to stop erased all conscious thought and responsibility from his brain.

Her whimpers and cries increased, and when his arm wrapped around her so he could thumb her clit he came face to face with her mark. Lost in the wet folds of her pussy and the screams that tore from her throat when she flew from the cliff he'd held her at so long, his teeth sank into her back, piercing her mating mark.

His actions threw her straight into a second orgasm that milked his cock until he, too, pumped his release into her, all the while with the taste of her blood hot in his mouth. His mate.

When the aftershocks of their mating cooled, his mouth popped from her skin and his cock slid from her body. He had to catch her from falling when he stepped back and easily scooped her into his arms to take her the few feet to his own bed. Not willing to leave her alone in her own room, he needed to feel her warmth curled against him. Their fate was sealed and, like it or not, they would be linked forever. It took 'til death do us part to a whole new level.

After he washed up in the bathroom and shut down the water, he took up a post in the chair across from the bed. She looked so beautiful and small lying there. Her creamy skin stood out stark from the dark room, making her look like a sweet treat to be devoured by a predator like him.

He brushed his hands through his hair and looked down at the floor. How could he let the animal take control like that? What would she do when she woke up a human mated to a shifter? What would he do? In two days they would have much to answer to at the tribunal. He hoped they survived.

\* \* \* \*

The eerie stillness of the night unsettled Bran. Animals should be scurrying, and owls hooting on a moonless night such as this. He'd opted to meet Nick far from home, and his nosy daughter. Katherine had provided him with her shocking news and taunted him mercilessly with it ever since.

Lara's mating mark complicated the situation beyond tolerance and it made her and Kane more dangerous than ever. By now the boy would have discovered it, and no female could escape a male cougar as powerful as that one. He'd heard the stories of the Gunn brothers and their sexual exploits. At one point he and the other council members had chalked it up to their increased animal DNA. What made them powerful killers was what also fed their voracious appetites above and beyond the average cougar.

The clan needed more females with the mating mark, but these half-breeds were not acceptable.

Wind rustled through the leaves and Bran raised his head at the scent carrying in on the wind.

"Took you long enough." He didn't bother to hide his irritation.

“Council business ran late and I had to wait until everyone left.” Nick stepped out of the shadows and into the clearing. “And you’ve got quite the fetish for this cloak and dagger shit. Did we really have to come all the way out here to do this?”

Nick’s mocking tone crawled under his skin for a moment before Bran shook it off. “Did you bring it?”

“Yeah I got it.” He produced a thick manila envelope from his pack and handed it over.

“Are you sure you got everything?” He couldn’t have any loose ends coming back to bite him in the ass down the road.

“I’ve been searching through records for days. I have it all and now you do.”

“I suppose you read through it.”

Nick laughed. “You know me too well to think I wouldn’t look. It made for some entertaining reading. Talk about flimsy evidence. That woman was essentially executed based on your word.”

Anger rushed through him at Nick’s gall. “You were just a kit when that sentence was passed down, and despite what may or may not be in this file, we were justified.”

Nick threw up his hands in surrender. “Whoa. Whoa. Didn’t mean to get you all riled up, but let’s face it. If Kane gets his hands on that file, the council might be forced to not only rule in Lara’s favor and offer her vengeance, they’ll likely decide to clean house.”

“Enough.” Bran didn’t want to hear anymore from this snot nosed kid. “That little bitch of Kane’s is trying to wipe out our clan’s future. If we don’t stop Kane from mating with her, do you realize how much power she’ll have?”

“Wait a minute. Seeking the truth before a kill is a far cry from mating. That’s not the kind of person he is.”

“Oh hell, Nick, how can you be so naïve? One minute you’ll stoop to the dirtiest task you’re given and the next you defend your childhood friend with blinders on. She bears a mating mark.”

Bran took great pleasure at the wild-eyed look of horror in the other man’s eyes. He figured that would shut him up.

“How is that possible?”

“Evil has a way of getting things done, boy. You should know that by now.” He spied Nick’s jugular vein pulse faster when his heart rate increased. His claws lengthened as he imagined how easy it would be to slit his throat. Nick had been easy to mold these last few years, but his usefulness was coming to a fast end. After he got him to do one more thing.

“She can’t make it to the tribunal. To get her close to the council puts us all in danger.”

“Kane won’t let that happen.”

Bran laughed loud and long, a sinister sound even to his own ears. “Kane will be lucky to live through the night. A cougar in the throes of mating heat is useless to the rest of us. She has him right where she wanted him all along. I’ve warned people many times over the years about underestimating your enemies, yet no one ever listens until after they’ve been robbed, hurt, or worse.”

“I can stop her. Her mating mark doesn’t mean jack to me.”

That arrogance was exactly what he’d hoped for. “By tomorrow night it will be too late.”

“There’s plenty of time between now and then. I’ll make sure of it.”

“You are a good friend, and I hope he appreciates your devotion. Take this.” He produced an envelope of his own. “It’s everything I’ve gathered on the witch. Study it tonight. There might be something in there you can use against her.”

Nick grabbed the packet and turned back in the direction he’d arrived. They had less than twenty-four hours to get this done or all hell would break loose and play out in front of the entire clan. His mistakes over the years had been many but with age had come wisdom and no bastard child no one ever wanted would ruin all of his hard work.



## Chapter Fourteen

Lara woke to the bright sunshine streaming into her room from the skylights above her bed. She didn't wake up disoriented this time; she knew right where she was, in the guest bedroom of Kane's home. The same place she'd been alone for the past two nights in a row. Just like the morning before, she stretched and popped her incredibly sore body as a soft sigh escaped her lips. The last time she'd seen Kane he'd taken her like she'd never been taken before, but when she'd woken the next morning she found herself back in her bed alone and two strange men sitting in the kitchen.

The bastard had left her here with a couple of babysitters with no word, no note, no nothing. Hell, if her body wasn't still aching so much she'd probably have thought the whole thing a dream. She absently rubbed at the back of her neck right where her birthmark was. It had tingled off and on for days, but it was the lethargy that bothered her. She couldn't ever remember being sick a day in her life, and always her injuries healed much quicker than most people's. She attributed that to probably having a higher metabolism than most. What else would drive her to such a frenzy all the time?

Now she thought of Kane and the upcoming tribunal. The ceremony was set for dusk tonight and she didn't feel confident about it at all. She didn't have a lot of evidence to support her, but the monkeys in the kitchen had actually talked to her about it yesterday. Said they'd heard someone from a psi clan would be coming in to assist and would likely be able to read her memories. That thought sent a fresh wave of chills down her spine. She really didn't want someone poking around in her head anymore than she wanted to be here...alone.

*Everyone leaves.*

She'd created enough firepower in her amulets to easily set herself free, yet she stayed here in this house like a good little girl. She growled at the thought, a rumbling sound that reminded her of Kane. She forced herself from the bed and wandered into the closet for something to wear. Kane had sent a woman to the house, a cat likely, with package after package of clothing for her. She appreciated the gesture; well, she would if

the bastard hadn't run off and left her. She had no idea what to do to prepare, and he was off doing God knows what.

*Everyone leaves.*

Anger warred with despair as she slumped forward, head in her hands. She swiped at the moisture that welled in her eyes. *Why the hell am I crying over him? What is wrong with me?*

A hand touched her shoulder lightly and she automatically flinched away from it. She didn't need sympathy from the men left behind to guard her.

"Lara."

Her head jerked at the sound of his voice and she launched herself from the bed and into his arms. Strong arms wrapped around her waist, holding her tight as she rained kisses all over him. Relief engulfed her at the sight of Kane looking tired but sexy as hell in her bedroom.

His hand swiped at the tears flowing across her cheeks, "Why are you crying, sugar?"

Her head and body froze at the supposed term of endearment. She wriggled herself free from his arms and landed softly on the bed where she jumped up, pulling her arm back, and sucker punched him in the gut.

"You son of a bitch! Where the hell have you been? Why did you leave me here with your goons? And why the hell are you still calling me *sugar*?"

"Take a breath, Lara, and sit down, we need to talk."

She bristled against his condescending tone. "I'm not a child to be ordered around."

"Then stop acting like one."

Rage bubbled up and she struggled not to attack him. She wouldn't get answers from him if she beat him bloody, or used any of her firepower. She inhaled sharply, holding that deep breath as long as she could before exhaling on a long sigh. She could control her emotions, she always had.

"Where have you been?" She was pleased at the calm, cold tone of her voice.

"Looking for something to save your ass tonight."

"What did you find?"

"That's the strange part...Nothing."

She stood and paced across the room, unable to think straight with Kane this close. Why would he not tell her where he'd gone? "What aren't you telling me? You were—are—mad at me and you left after fucking my brains out without a word. What the hell is going on? Are you feeding me to the bloodsuckers tonight?"

He grabbed her hand and pulled her to him. She tried to break his grasp, she really did, but he held tight and forced her close. She could smell the soap he'd used to shower, but it did little to cover his natural earthy scent. The kind of smell that drove a woman to hug pillows close for comfort when her man wasn't around.

"What I want right now and what I am allowed are two totally different things. Officially there is still a death warrant out on you, and unless we are successful tonight either I or someone else in my family will be expected to kill you."

The harsh whisper of his words broke her heart. The pain he endured seemed so evident, yet she didn't understand why he had to pull away. Her hand swept under her hair and nervously rubbed at her mark.

"Let me." He pushed her hand away and placed his warm hand against her skin. No way could she have kept the deep sigh to herself, his touch felt too good.

"Do you remember what happened the other night?"

Of course she did, he'd taken her at his most feral and fucked her until she'd nearly passed out. A shiver ran down her skin at the delicious memory of it. "Yes."

"Do you remember me biting you?"

She furrowed her brow at him, thinking back. Now that he mentioned it, she did vaguely recall his teeth scraping along her spine and biting into...she jerked away from his hand. "What did you do? Does that have something to do with why I keep rubbing the back of my neck right around my birthmark?"

He didn't answer right away, and she knew. Panic settled in and she fought against him, shoving him back, forcing him to release her.

"How long after I was gone did you start to physically hurt? One day? Two? What I did was unforgivable and irrevocable."

"God damn it, Kane, say it. What exactly is happening to me?"

"We are mated. Bonded together as one. It changes our chemistry until our lives are bound to one another. If one dies, so does the other. If we are separated we'll suffer in pain until eventually we can't take it anymore. According to legend, separated mates have been known to go feral. You and I, sugar, are stuck together forever."

*Stuck.* Of all the words he'd just uttered, that should have devastated her. The description of him being stuck with her sliced to the bone. He didn't want her. How the hell was she supposed to handle that? A punch in the face would have hurt less. She staggered backwards until her back slammed into the wall with no thoughts but of the pain gripping her insides, making her dizzy and nauseous.

When he moved in her direction she yelled, “No. Don’t you come near me!” She didn’t want him touching or even talking to her anymore. She couldn’t breathe in here and she needed out. She grabbed her windbreaker and shoes and ran for the door, desperate to get away before she broke down so he wouldn’t see her give into weakness and cry her eyes out.

The two men sitting at the kitchen table looked up at her, concern written all over their faces, before she could avert her eyes to the door she desperately wanted to get through. She heard the scraping sound of chairs as they moved but she didn’t care. She was leaving and doing it by herself. She clutched the two amulets hanging from her neck, just waiting for her to engage them.

As soon as she swung the door open the earthy smell of the woods around her, as well as the undertones of wildlife, fresh air, and even the nearby stream filled her nose. For the second time in two days she marveled at this sudden, acute sense of smell. The air ruffled across her skin and she felt the individual oxygen particles spear through the fine down of hair along her arms.

She shoved her feet into her shoes and, with one last look at the house, took off on a run. The one activity she craved everyday gave her the sense of freedom no matter her circumstances. She could think as she moved, and the wind blowing across her cheeks would wipe away any tears that escaped from her eyes.

With every stroke on her face or shift in the breeze a new scent would tickle her nose, something she sought to identify and catalog in her brain. This new development fascinated her, but now that she knew about the mating she wondered what this all meant. Later, when she had herself back under control she would return to Kane and demand more answers, but for now she would do what she had to in order to let go of her emotion.

\* \* \* \*

Kane walked through the house, ready to go after Lara and drag her stubborn ass back to the house where he could lock her up until she understood. He’d been amazed when he’d walked back into his home and caught his mate’s scent, and the pain in his body had eased. His brother had told him some of the things that change after a mating, but since Lucas had mated with a human, Kane hadn’t paid that much attention. He never saw himself mating, and especially not with a fragile human woman, though Lara was the last person to ever come across as fragile.

She knew how to take care of herself and those around her. Cross her and she made you fucking pay for it.

The men in his kitchen started to speak, but the low snarl rumbling in his throat warned them off. He didn't feel like talking or explaining anything to anyone except her. He'd searched the area around the house before he'd come in and hadn't detected anything unusual, so she'd likely be safe. That didn't stop him from heading out front anyways. He needed to be out there with her, even if some distance separated them.

He sat in the swing at the far end of his porch, getting comfy for his wait. He'd added the swing right after he moved in. Every time he walked out here he had thought of his mother and the hours she would spend outside waiting for her father. She always said she wanted to smell the outdoors and that if she waited long enough the wind would carry his scent to her as well. It was her comfort for all the time he had to spend away from home.

Now he understood more than ever. He'd left and made Lara stay behind. He'd never intended to complete the mating ritual, but the sharp edge of his anger allowed things to get out of control, and when he slid inside her he lost his mind over her eagerness to fulfill his darkest desires. He couldn't have stopped it even if he'd tried. It had taken him a couple of days to accept it, and now he could only hope that she would eventually forgive him as well.

The wind shifted and, just like his mother had taught him, he picked up Lara's one of a kind scent. The uniqueness that was her would plague him his entire life no matter what happened. He smiled and settled back further, fighting the urge to shift and run. He was a predator who wanted his mate, but he'd give her as much time as he could stand.

He closed his eyes and pictured her here in front of him, with that wicked grin on her face teasing him, taunting him. His cock grew and he shifted around trying to find some comfort from a need beyond his control. What would they do now? The tribunal would begin in a few hours and he would have to sacrifice his control to a group of men he'd always trusted but now wanted as far from his mate as he could get them.

While he was gone he had contacted his friend Nick to help him. First, to make sure two of the best hunters were sent to the house to stay with her, and second to lead him to the evidence he needed to save her life. In his world, justice for a wrongful death was not only acceptable but honorable, especially when a child avenged a parent. Not that he wanted Lara to kill anyone in his family, but like it or not, and he actually did like it, she was his family now.

Admitting that wasn't as hard as he'd thought. She'd gotten under his skin the instant he'd seen her. His hatred of what he'd thought was an evil nature had conflicted his instinctively recognizing his mate. His body had lit up from the moment she'd entered his world. Even now just the thought of her body gliding against his made him want to come in his jeans.

She'd make a good mate. Strong and independent. As a human it would be difficult to be accepted, but if anyone could it would be her because she would stand up to them. Aggressiveness was a valued trait among his people. But first they had to get through the tribunal and he had to reveal their status. He would have to leave the clan; they would do no less to him than they had with Lucas. Then what?

He needed to talk to his brother, decide what to do. Without the black cougar to protect them, the clan would be vulnerable to elimination by their rivals. He would have to insist on Malcolm's reinstatement. He curled his lip at the last memory of his brother. For some reason he'd wanted Kane to doubt his mate, turn away from her. Why?

Luckily the clan had other relationships and resources to turn to when they needed. Already he'd chosen the right cougar for the job, the one who would bring Malcolm to him. He laughed at the image of that, thinking about what method would be used to lure him back. Good thing he wasn't far.

The cool breeze whistled through Kane's hair and his head jerked to the left, while his heart stopped in fear.

*Lara.*

## Chapter Fifteen

Tired and worn out, Lara slowed her pace to a walk and then stopped completely, bending at the waist and grasping her thighs. Air sawed in and out of her lungs from the punishment she'd just inflicted on her body. She didn't track how far she'd gone, but judging by the placement of the sun in the sky she'd guess she'd run for a couple of hours and the day was now solidly in the afternoon. Her time ticked away.

Lara's head jerked up when a twig snapped behind her, the sound so loud to her ears it could have been a nearby gunshot. She whirled around and scanned the landscape around her. Nothing out of the ordinary jumped out, and as she focused from one sense to another she found nothing unusual.

*Snap out of it, you're just being paranoid.*

She let out the breath she'd been holding and contemplated her next move. She'd been circling the property while she ran, but now she wasn't sure how far she was from the house. Despite seeing nothing to upset her, she couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. It wouldn't be surprising to her if someone else tried to attack her, but this time she was more prepared. She fingered the more powerful amulet she wore and worked to release the tension now buzzing through her.

She gauged the direction of the sun in the sky and the likely time of day, then turned in the direction of Kane's home. She needed to get back and start preparing for tonight's festivities. *Oh boy, I can hardly wait.*

A turn to the side and she came face to face with a blond man she'd never seen before.

"Hello, Lara."

Instinctively she took a few steps backwards. The unease that had plagued her turned into full-blown fear at the very tall, handsome and broad man standing in front of her.

"Do I know you?" Her voice sounded clear except for a slight tremble that she hoped he didn't pick up on.

"No, we haven't officially met yet, but I'm Nick, the one Kane asked to watch over you while he was gone."

“That’s nice of him, but last time I checked I’m a big girl and can take care of myself.”

Her hands rubbed at the amulet continuously, warming up its energy. She had a feeling she was going to need it.

“Of course you can, but you’re in the middle of a cougar clan filled with people that don’t hide how much they loathe what you’ve done to them.”

“I didn’t—”

He raised his hand to interrupt her. “You tried to kill our Guardian, a family member, we all take that personally.”

“Why are you here? I already have two babysitters keeping an eye on me.”

“Since Kane hasn’t returned yet, I’ve been sent to bring you to the tribunal tonight. To personally escort you to the site.”

“But Kane—” She shut her mouth, not sure if she should tell this man that Kane, her mate, was not only back but was far more than just her protector now. “I have hours before I have to be there. In fact, I was headed back to the house now so I could get ready. I have no intention of being late.”

“You’re not going to have time for that. I’ve been sent to bring you in early, one of our council members would like to meet with you beforehand.”

“Why? Kane didn’t mention anything about a pre meeting, nor did either of the guys watching the house. I’m afraid I’m going to have to refuse that request, I’m not ready to leave yet.” She moved forward, skirting around Nick, but he stepped sideways and blocked her path.

“It wasn’t a request.”

Anger flared at the not so subtle threat. “Get out of my way, Nick. I don’t appreciate bullying and I’m sure Kane would want me to wait for him.”

His hand reached out and grabbed her arm, his grip like a vise. “You are going with me, and whether it’s painful or not is totally up to you, so don’t be a bitch and do what you’re told.”

She pulled at her arm but he was as strong as he looked, and it wasn’t going to be that easy to get away from him. She closed her eyes and concentrated inward, drawing on the power of her amulets. Where she should have felt a familiar warmth and energy buzz, she found only cold emptiness.

“You really are that stupid, aren’t you? Thinking you’re going to use those useless amulets against me? I know exactly what you are and both of your witch’s tools have been neutralized.”



He was right. There was no magic in either one of her necklaces. *What the hell? I charged these myself.* Her gaze darted around the wooded area as she considered her options, though there weren't many.

"No one is out here, but if you don't believe me feel free to scream your pretty little head off if it makes you feel any better. Either way, you are going with me." His head tilted upward and his nose flared suddenly. He yanked her closer to him and leaned into her neck and sniffed her.

Having a stranger invade her personal space and sniff her freaked her out, it had to stop. She lifted her leg and slammed it into his groin so hard even she winced when her knee connected. He howled in pain and momentarily released her arm, giving her the opening she needed to run.

Her feet pounded the packed dirt as she ran down the narrow path, certain he wasn't far behind, and if he shifted she could forget it. Quickly she decided to abandon the easy path and instead make a more direct approach to the cabin through the brush and trees.

Blood roared in her ears and sweat broke out over her whole body. She did her best to push the fear away, but she couldn't believe this is how things would work out. *Kane, where the fuck are you? What's the point of being mated to a powerful shapeshifter if he's around when you need him the most?*

She stole a glance behind her and watched in horror as the guy chasing her shifted smoothly to a buff colored cougar. He wasn't black like Kane, but he was nearly as large and really fast crashing through the brush. She turned to look forward before she ended up face first into a tree. That wouldn't help her a damn bit. This is not what she expected to happen today. No, she'd have rather faced her accuser head on so she could at least have her peace before she went down fighting to the death. Something more honorable than this.

From somewhere in the distance she heard a scream, the harrowing sound of someone or something crying out in agony. It haunted her as she ran, seeking some place to hide or get away. The cabin was her only chance and she was too far away. Lara's vision narrowed and sharpened as her panic escalated. She heard every grunt, snarl, and hiss of the cat behind her and her body ached as the urge to jump right out of her skin washed over her. On the verge of a full-blown panic attack, she had to concentrate on saving herself.

She knew the minute she could no longer outrun. The air swirled around her and the whoosh of air expelled from lungs thundered in her ears. When her brain processed the cougar's leap, she twisted to the left and jumped out of the way. Not quite fast enough, as a sharp claw tore

into the flesh of her arm, drawing blood and creating excruciating pain she pushed at, doing her best to keep going.

The gut wrenching screams drew closer as she shifted directions. Thinking she might make it out of here in one piece, she was suddenly pushed to the ground by the paws digging into the skin of her back, even through the thin jacket she wore.

She fell to the ground, pinned by the furred body of her pursuer. His teeth grabbed onto her shoulder and dug into her skin, enough to paralyze her on the spot. Pain reeled through her head as the taste of blood coated her tongue.

“What the—?”

Her heart raced in her body along with the adrenalin, forcing her to react with more strength than she thought possible. She managed to push her body and roll, forcing the cougar underneath her. She needed to move away but he had a solid grip on her shoulder with sharp ass teeth.

*This is gonna hurt.*

With her eyes squeezed shut, she gritted her teeth against the coming pain as she surged forward, getting away from Nick, but not without a chunk of her flesh tearing from her body.

The cougar snarled as she moved. Her scream filled the air, sounding foreign and disconnected to her own ears, but when it was met by another one of those head splitting banshee screams from the woods she knew Kane was searching for her.

Unfortunately she was out of time. Nick flipped to his feet and lunged for her, tackling her once more. Underneath him again, she'd had enough, and snarled at him and bared her teeth just like he did, except his golden cat eyes bulged in his head in surprise. He reared his head back and she reacted instinctively; it was either him or her, and she wasn't about to die like this. Her forearms flexed so her fingers could grab his throat and claws burst from her fingers, slicing across his throat. Blood splattered onto her face and clothes, but it was the frozen look of disbelief on the cougar's face that freaked her out. Scrambling to move as the big cat fell, Lara jumped to her feet and stared down at the blood on her hands. Not just blood.

The blood from Nick coated the layer of hair on her hands and claws.

*Oh, Jesus, No!*

*I have fucking claws and fur.*

Before she could process what it all meant, a black cougar burst through the brush at full speed, barely stopping before he plowed her over. His head swiveled between her and the dead cougar on the ground.

Kane's body shimmered and made a few popping sounds as she watched him shift from cougar to man. If she wasn't trembling with fear over the changes in her own body she might have taken the time to admire the science behind what an impossible thing it should be.

"What have you done?" His anger hit her like a slap in the face.

"Me? Are you kidding me? You—him—everyone..." she stuttered, unable to form a complete sentence.

\* \* \* \*

He looked at her then...really looked at her. *How is this possible?* Despite the blood of the kill covering her he could see the subtle changes. Her eyes were gold instead of their normal color, and there were two tiny teeth points poking at her lip. She probably didn't even realize she'd cut her lip on them several times.

Those two differences were nothing compared to the thin layer of tawny colored hair on her arms, parts of her face, and even her neck. At least, what he could see through the blood. She'd managed to kill one of his clan by severing his neck, which is the instinctive kill pattern of a big cat. *She's not a cat. She's human.*

"What is wrong with me? Why do I look like this?"

How could he explain something he couldn't comprehend himself? Did he somehow do this to her by mating? Lucas hadn't mentioned anything about his mate doing anything like this.

"I—I don't know. You look like you started to shift but it stopped."

"How do I make it go away?" The panic rose along with the volume of her voice.

"Stay calm."

"Stay calm! Are you kidding me? I'm covered in blood and fur and the fur is not his!" She waved her hands as she ranted, the stench of her fear scaring even him. The instinct to protect and shelter his mate rode him hard, a feeling he had to react to.

"We've got to get you back to the house. We'll get you cleaned up and together we'll figure this thing out."

"What about him."

"Don't worry about it. It will be taken care of."

He steered her away from the bloody death scene in the direction of the cabin. "Are you okay to walk? I could carry you."

She shook her head, then lifted it to meet his gaze. The sheen of tears in her eyes broke through the crack she'd created around his heart, and he knew then that he wanted to spend the rest of his life protecting her.

## *Chapter Sixteen*

Kane led Lara into the bathroom of the master suite, careful to avoid her sharp and lethal claws. He could hear her heart still racing in her chest and knew he needed to get her calm. He turned on both the shower and the tub. First he would get the blood off in the shower, and then together they would bathe in the lake-sized tub he'd known would come in handy one day.

One by one he took off her soiled clothes until she stood nude and trembling before him.

"It's going to be okay, Lara, I promise." She looked at him with such sad eyes he wondered if he could live up to his promise. If he had changed her somehow and it couldn't be fixed, things would never be the same between them. "Come on, babe, you'll feel a lot better when your clean again and I will help you any way that I can as soon as your body calms down. You've put it through a lot today, and while I don't know anything about partial shifts, I do know that if you don't have control of your body and mind teaching you to shift back will be near impossible."

"I'm fine." She stepped into the spray and let the water sluice over her; it turned pink as it washed away the violence of what she'd done. It had only taken a glance at the dead cougar to know who it was...Nick. Already Kane mourned for his childhood friend and needed her to make him understand what had happened out there, but the bond of a mate was an even greater pull, and right now making sure she was safe and secure was his top priority.

"I'm going to let you clean up for a minute and go and talk to the guards out front. Until we understand the facts of today I think we should all be on guard."

"He wanted to kill me."

Her sudden confession speared through him as he considered just how close he'd come to losing her. It disgusted him that he hadn't been able to protect her.

"Soon, baby. I'll be right back and we can talk about it." He left her then, even though it gave him actual physical pain to do so while knowing his mate needed him.

Back in the kitchen he found Carl propped against the counter waiting for him, the tension clearly evident in his expression and bunched muscles of his shoulders and arms.

“Where’s Lee?”

“Don’t know. Right after Lara left he said he was going to the head and that was the last time I saw him.”

“That was hours ago. You search the house?”

“Yes, nothing here.”

A growl came up before he could think to control it. “Then we have to operate on the assumption that he had something to do with the attack on Lara and has fled. He’s mine now.”

“Kane—”

He held up his hand to stop his friend’s protest. “Like it or not she’s my mate, and an unauthorized attack of one of us falls under my jurisdiction and you damn well know it.”

“But this is Lee we’re talking about.”

“Yeah, and it was Nick who tried to kill her.”

“What? Is he okay?”

“Is *he* okay? What do you think? Call the council and tell them we need another clean up out here. I’m sure they will have no trouble finding it. Oh, and you can let them know that we won’t be showing up for their damned tribunal, either. I have to take care of Lara and I need to know the house is secure so decide now, are you in or out?”

Carl’s hesitation only lasted a few heartbeats. “I’m in. Take care of your mate. No one is getting past me.”

Kane nodded his head and headed back to Lara—just in time, too. She stood in the bathroom looking bewildered and lost as she dried herself with a bath towel. He noticed her claws had retracted but he could still see glimpses of the extended canines, and when she ruffled the towel across her limbs the light layer of fur stood up on end. Admittedly it was the strangest sight he’d seen, but when she shook her hair and looked at him he would swear he’d never seen a more beautiful and glowing woman in his life.

“No need for that quite yet, baby.” He took the towel from her and scooped her into his arms. The soft, downy fur slid against his skin and it felt so damn good he started to get hard. “You still need to relax and I need to teach you.”

The heated water felt just right as he carried her into the Jacuzzi tub he’d filled with bubbles just for her. Vanilla and cinnamon wafted around them as he sank into the seat at the end of the tub, not to mention Lara’s own scent, which seemed to be stronger in her partial feline form.

*Feline.* He'd never expected this but now that he thought about it, she'd shown subtle signs.

When he flipped the switch on the jets the water roiled and bubbled around them.

"Oh, Kane, that feels so good." She slid from his lap, dunked underneath the water, and resurfaced slick and soapy, a look that did little to dissuade his thickening erection.

"I thought you might like it. You've had a tough day."

She barked a laugh at him. "A tough day? Are you kidding me?" She flashed her fur-covered hands at him. "I think I'd call this a little more than a tough day."

"You know what I meant. I need you relaxed and open to my instruction."

"Always gotta be the man in charge, don't you?"

"Well, if you want I could just leave you here and let you try to figure it out on your own." He pushed against the ledge and started to haul himself up.

"Jesus, Kane, don't be so uptight. I was just kidding. You know, trying to lighten the mood."

"You want to lighten the mood? How's this?" He grabbed a naked breast and tweaked the nipple until she squealed.

"Oww." She slid backwards into the seat at the opposite end of the tub and swished her arms and hands through the bubbles. "Why am I like this, Kane? Is this from the mating?"

"I thought that at first, but I don't think so, babe."

"At least you aren't calling me sugar anymore."

"I think we've moved beyond that now, don't you think?"

She stared at him for a while, amazed at how far he'd gone to help her since he'd found her. She had killed one of his kind, his friend, with little to no understanding about what had happened. His friend. Yet, he seemed far more concerned about her. No one had ever done that for her and she didn't know what to do with that.

"At least the claws retracted."

"I'm surprised they stayed out as long as they did. They don't generally pop out and stay out. They require you to flex your forearms or, in the case of a fully shifted cougar, the muscles of their forelegs and then immediately retract when you are no longer flexing."

She lifted her hand from the water to look at it; her nails looked short and trim just as before. There was no sign of broken skin or trauma at all. "Why did mine stay out?"

“Hon, I have never seen anyone go through a partial shift like you did. More than likely you went into shock. Your body was so tense I could hear your racing heartbeat and rushing blood. It scared me.”

What a remarkable thing, her big strong mate who was the deadliest predator in the mountains of North Carolina, and he had been scared for her. “Sitting here looking at the fur and the big teeth is scaring me. What am I now? Am I going to turn into a cat? Will I ever be human again?”

“I don’t have all the answers, this is new to me, but I do have a theory.” He hesitated before going on. “What do you know about your father?”

Her head snapped back at his statement, she hadn’t been expecting that at all. “My father? Why?”

“I don’t think this change came from our mating. There is no precedent for mating to alter DNA that much. Lucas mated with a non-shifter and nothing like this happened. He wasn’t the first to mate outside the clan, but it has been decades since anything like that has happened and there are stories...legends actually.”

She had a feeling where he was headed, but waited for him to tell her. She wasn’t sure she could wrap her brain around what he wanted to say.

“As a young boy I heard stories, fairy tales I thought, about what happened one time when a shapeshifter left the clan for the woman he loved. They married and moved to an isolated area of the country, but there was news brought in occasionally and one day an announcement of a birth. As you can imagine—or maybe not—this was not welcome news. The council wanted to send a death enforcer, my grandfather to be exact, to take care of the problem.”

Lulled by his voice and the need to touch him, she eased her way into his lap. When she snuggled her head against his chest she was rewarded with a soft purr, a sound she would never get tired of.

“So, what happened?”

“My grandfather refused, causing a huge rift between our family and the clan council that lasted through the decades.”

“But what about the baby?”

“There were rumors that he was born half human and half cougar, unable to shift fully to one or the other.”

She sat up in shock. “You think I’m going to be stuck like this? Is that what you are telling me?”

“Whoa, calm down. That’s not what I’m saying at all. Every shifter who reaches transformation has to be taught how to shift. It takes a lot of concentration and practice before it becomes second nature.”

“Kane, I don’t want to be like this forever.” Shivers raced across her skin as her entire body shook in the fear of never being able to go in public again.

“Then let’s get you shifted.” He pushed her gently off his lap. “Take a seat and get comfortable. In order for this to work you’ve got to slow your heart rate again and relax.”

Despite the tension she felt she sat back and did her best to relax, taking in as much air as she could, holding it briefly and then exhaling on a nice slow count.

“Close your eyes and concentrate. Try counting backwards from twenty while picturing your normal appearance.”

She started counting. Ten...and thought about running...nine...long black hair...eight...the smooth skin of her stomach slicked with sweat when she did her sit ups...seven...six...five...four...three...Kane’s tongue stroking bare flesh from her toes to her neck...two...kissing and biting her mates neck...one.

She slowly opened her eyes to Kane’s wide grin and sparkling eyes. She looked down at her arm and saw her furless skin back. She laughed and leapt into his arms. “Thank you.” She pressed her lips to his open mouth and he grabbed her on a snarl before plunging his tongue inside her mouth, twirling and touching everywhere. She sighed against him so glad to be normal again and in the arms of the man she loved.

When his cock bulged against her belly, she pulled herself away. He had saved her, cared for her, and now loved her, and she wanted nothing more than to return some of that. “I want to taste you.”

“What do you think you’ve been doing?”

“Smart ass. That’s not what I meant and you know it.” She watched him stare at her, looking for something she didn’t know. Finally he pulled himself from the water and sat on the ledge of the tub so she could kneel on the seat he’d occupied and have her way.

Looking at the swollen crown and thick shaft, she licked her lips in anticipation. She settled in place between his legs and wrapped her hand around his length, stroking the veins that ran along the underside.

Her lips parted as she dipped down, opening for her mate’s cock. Her tongue curled around the head of him, licking him over and over. *God, he tastes like the outdoors and sunshine, glorious warm sunshine.*

His dick twitched and he groaned long and loud. “Jesus, Lara, how am I supposed to last when you touch me like that?”

She smiled around him and continued to explore, taking a little bit more inside her mouth as she went. Her pussy creamed in excitement, preparing her for what would come later. The thought of him entering her



in one smooth move to the hilt made her suck harder until he cried out. She licked the length as she moved up and down and suckled, her own body aching to be filled. Every snarl and grunt Kane made vibrated against her clit, driving her mad with need.

He seemed to grow larger with each new pulse until he stretched her mouth impossibly. When his hands threaded through her hair and pulled her farther onto his cock, she moaned around him. His hips bucked, forcing the tip to the back of her throat, and her skin burned from the force of which he held her hair. God, she loved this feeling. If she could just...

With her free hand, she reached for her clit, circling through the slick folds before rubbing against the hard nub begging for attention.

"Not yet, baby." He grabbed her arm and pulled her hand away from her pussy. She whined around his cock, protesting his actions. "Aww, don't worry, you're going to get your reward, but the longer you wait the sweeter it'll be."

She sucked harder in response, loving the way he seemed to grow the closer he got to his own orgasm. She wanted to make him come, hear him moan her name until the wild wicked taste of him exploded on her tongue.

She flickered her tongue around the flesh fast and furious until a hard growl emanated from him, igniting her own fiery lust as both his hands fisted her hair and his hips pushed forward, fucking her mouth. When she thought she wouldn't be able to stand another second, he pushed her off of him and lifted her into his arms as he stormed from the bathroom.

In front of the bed she expected he would place her there and make crazy mad love to her until she screamed and begged him to stop. *Or, at least that's what I'm hoping for.*

But he surprised her by putting her on all fours in front of the fireplace, the plush rug cushioning her knees. Her breath caught in her throat as her empty sex ached for him to hurry up. He shifted quickly behind her and slid home. Her vision blurred as he stretched and filled her and she gave up even trying to regain a normal breath. *Oh, yes, so good.*

"Mine." The word rumbled from him and she felt the meaning of that possession in every fiber of her body. He pumped behind her, working in and out of her in quick, short thrusts. She clenched the fur below her by the handfuls on a low, long wail of pleasure as he hit new sensitive spots with every move.

"This is what I needed, Lara, to be buried deep into your burning flesh. We need this to survive." He dug deeper, driving her mad as her release grew closer but not quite there. "I can't live without you, baby, but more importantly I don't want to."

He tilted his hips, pressing against the one spot he knew would push her over the edge. As lights burst in her head and passion engulfed her, she screamed so loud and so long she thought the windows might have rattled.

It didn't end, with each continued stroke he drew out the soul-destroying ecstasy she felt. When she thought she might recover, he hit another new spot that threw her over the edge again as tremor after tremor of pleasure rocketed through her until she thought she might die from too much.

"Come on, baby, milk me, make me come."

His hands squeezed the globes of her ass before coming down and covering her back with his own. Perspiration ran between them as he growled low and deep once again. His pointed teeth nibbled on her neck as he changed his strokes, making them hard and deep. When his teeth pierced her mate mark everything within and around her imploded, resulting in a complete and total loss of control. She was his and he was hers, their joining more complete than ever before.

With a final thrust behind her, his release jetted hot and thick inside her, his cock pulsing and throbbing. Never again would she have to be alone with no one to trust or care for. Their need for each other so strong and pure, they would spend the rest of their lives loving, desiring and fighting with each other.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

Kane woke hours later with Lara curled in his arms, still lying together in front of a roaring fire. His hands stroked down her fire-heated back as he remembered how many times and ways they'd made love over the last few hours. A soft snore sounded against his neck and he chuckled. How he loved all the little sexy noises she made, even in her sleep.

He looked out the window and noticed the slight change in the darkness. Dawn would be here soon. He needed to get up and take care of a few things, but not yet. First he needed to spend some more time with his mate. He lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed, nibbling her jaw and lips as he went.

"Don't tell me you're not sleepy." Her drowsy voice sounded soft and sexy, another sound she could make that got him hard and ready. Not that he needed much of an excuse. A look, her scent, anything about her, really.

"Did I wear you out, baby? Can't take anymore?" He bit at her lips, sucking the lower half into his mouth.

She pulled away. "I can take anything you're willing to dish out, Kane, and then some."

"Ohh, cocky in your sleep, aren't you? Well, we shall see about that. I can't wait to find your limit and when I do, I'll push you past it."

"Promises, promises."

He shut her up with a kiss—the hard, urgent kind that had his tongue darting in and out—fucking her mouth like he'd been fucking her pussy all night long. He rolled on top of her, pushing between her thighs and entering her slowly, one inch at a time, reveling in the tight warmth surrounding him.

"You're going to be nothing but trouble, aren't you?"

\* \* \* \*

In a surly but somewhat satisfied mood, Kane walked back into their bedroom to find Lara staring out the skylight. Her black hair fanned out underneath her head and her face seemed to glow with an ethereal beauty

far more precious than before. Whatever the change, it agreed with her, and she looked even more bitable in the light of day than she did at night.

“Anything interesting out there?”

“Not as interesting as you.” Her head turned and a heated glow in her eyes swept over him.

As tempted as he was to join her again in the bed, they needed to talk and he knew horizontal wasn’t the way to do this.

“The cougar you killed yesterday was in fact Nick Smith, my childhood friend and the one man I thought I could trust my life with.” He dropped into the chair at the foot of the bed and roughly pushed his hands through his hair before scrubbing them down over his face.

“I’m sorry.” Her simple, quiet apology seemed heartfelt despite what Nick had planned to do to her. He’d been inside his friend’s house this morning and seen first hand his obsession with Lara, and if he hadn’t already been dead, Kane would have hunted him down and ripped his heart out himself. The black rage had swept through him unlike anything else before and damn near brought him to his knees.

“As much as it’s not necessary for you to say that, thank you.”

“He was your friend at some point; he must have been a very good man to deserve that.” She wrapped herself in the sheet and sat back against the headboard, never taking her gaze from his.

“I love you, Lara.” Her eyes widened in shock and her lush mouth parted slightly. He’d taken her by surprise. *I like that.*

“I—I—”

“You don’t have to say anything. I just wanted you to know. Our mating was my fault and will likely cause problems for us both, but it’s more than just science or nature that made me do it.”

She nodded, trying to hide the tears trickling from her eyes, but he caught them before she could. Blood surged through his veins and the instinct to hold her, protect her, rode him hard once again. But they had to get through this and then let things fall where they had to.

“I’ve spoken to the council this morning, the charges for attempting to kill my family have been dropped.”

“What?”

“The evidence against your mother, including many falsified statements, were found in Nick’s residence last night, and the council has judged that your mother’s death may have been a grave mistake, one no one can fix or make up for. However, due to that, the laws of our clan do allow you justice. The Guardian who carried out the order was my father, and since he is deceased your justice has to be served against the next

Guardian. Which, until last month, would have been Lucas, which gives you full justification in your actions.

“But—”

“Let me finish. I have to say it and then you can decide for yourself what you want.”

“I know—”

“No! I have to say it.” He didn’t care how sweet she looked in his bed or how much he craved her. She had rights and he was damn sure not going to fuck this up, too.

“Lucas has been shunned, at least for now, which makes me Guardian. So your rights now extend to me and only me. You can challenge me and I have to accept. It’s your right in our clan, and I believe in that right.”

“Kane, please don’t do this.”

“You have to know this.”

“I already do.”

He sat in stunned silence, thinking, *how could she know?*

“I know what you’re thinking and I know you’ll figure it out, but let me save you the time and tell you. I know about the rules because of Malcolm.”

That was it, the other shoe had dropped.

Unbidden, a growl sounded in his chest. He didn’t want a reminder of her relationship with Malcolm, not now. It was far too dangerous for his brother, especially now.

“Stop, Kane. Without that knowledge, you would have never gotten me back here so easily.” She grabbed the sheet and walked from his bed, kneeling down in front of him. “So many things have changed since I enlisted Malcolm’s help. I wasn’t honest with him and for a while wasn’t open to you. But damn, look how far things have come in such a short time. Thanks to you, I see things clearly now. It’s hard to think about how much time I’ve wasted on hate and revenge.” Her hand reached out and touched his leg and the connection between them sizzled.

“I don’t want to live like that anymore. The truth is what I seek. I’m a contrary, stubborn woman who likes things her own way, but Kane, for you—no for us—I want to try and put that part of me in the past.”

He didn’t know what to say. He felt the truth of her words to his core, knew for certain she would try. He doubted she was about to become a sweet little housewife, but he had a feeling he could at least tame her or die trying. Didn’t sound like a bad way to go.

“So it’s settled then?”

He smiled at her question. “Yeah, for now.”

“Good. Now, for the important stuff. Did your council have any thoughts on my new, um...abilities?”

“I didn’t tell them.”

She sat back on her haunches. “Why not?”

“Nick has been researching you. I found a lot of notes and background on you, a pretty thick file actually. He seemed to be interested in your connection to your father.”

“Did he know who he was?”

“Separate from all the research, we found a small journal which indicated that he did, It was implied that your father resided in my clan.”

She fell back on her butt, stunned by his revelation.

“What does this mean?”

“That there’s a good chance you are born of a human mother and a werecougar father.”

The stricken look on her face tore at his gut. But it was the fear in her eyes that really did him in.

“Lara, look at me. Focus on us, baby, we’re going to face this together, but for now we’ll keep this to ourselves. Okay?”

She nodded and climbed onto his lap. “I love you, Kane.”

“Oh, baby, you are my heart. My mate. My love.”

## Epilogue

Lara heard the knock at the door first and glanced toward the living room for Kane. “You expecting someone?”

“As a matter of fact I am.” He walked to the front door and opened it to a pretty blonde woman who reminded her of the woman who attacked her a couple of weeks ago.

“Hey, Chey, thanks for coming.” He opened the door and motioned for her to come inside.

The sight of the woman raised the hairs all along Lara’s body, her claws extended and her vision narrowed. *No, no I can’t do this now. Stay calm. I’m sure there’s a very good reason why Kane is letting this female into our home.*

Deep breaths in and out, and the effects began to wear off, although the sound of the woman’s voice grated on her last nerve. Certain her body had shifted back, she walked into the living room to join them.

“Lara, this is Cheyenne, or Chey as most of us call her. Chey, this is my wife.”

The woman nodded to Kane but did nothing to acknowledge her. This woman really bothered her. She was extraordinarily beautiful with her white blonde hair and skin so translucent there were times the light reflected it to look like cool white porcelain. Her eyes, though, had to be the brightest blue color she’d ever seen, but they were shuttered and impossible to read.

She came across as cold and unfeeling, which Lara would bet was only the case until you flared her temper and then she was mean and ruthless. She didn’t like her around Kane one bit.

“Why is she here?”

“It’s okay, Lara, I’ve asked her here on official business. This shouldn’t take long.” He proceeded to explain her station in the clan. While not an official participant, she and her kind were occasionally called upon for unique assignments. Her kind was all part of a long line of warriors not all that different from the black cougars, though not as deadly yet still dangerous. They lived on the other side of the dragon.

“Chey, I have an assignment for you, do you have the time?”

“For you, sweetheart, I’ll make the time.”

Lara snarled at the woman, knowing she said that crap just to piss her off.

“I need you to find someone for me and bring him back here.”

“Is that all? Piece of cake.”

“Come on, Chey, if it was a piece of cake do you think I would have called you?”

She laughed, a soft throaty sound. A sexy noise that probably had men panting after her all the time. “I guess you’re right. So tell me, why is this one so difficult.”

“It’s Malcolm.”

Silence filled the room as all of them froze, letting that nugget of information settle around them.

“You ask for a lot.”

“I know, and I wouldn’t even ask if I didn’t have to and you know it. So, will you take the assignment or not?”

The woman paced to the window and looked out into the trees, the tension radiating off of her in waves. “I want double the normal fee and assurance my debt is paid in full.”

“I’m not asking you because of that. I’m asking because you’re the one who can do the job. But yes, your debt will be paid and the money has already been wired to your account.”

“Just as arrogant as ever, I see.” She paced to the opposite side of the room, her gaze never wavering from the window. “You know what will happen if I do this.”

“If there were any other way to get him here, I wouldn’t ask.”

Her shoulders dipped, so slight most wouldn’t have noticed. “Then I’ll do it.”

“Great. I’ll forward all the information I have on his activities as well as the rest of the fee.”

She turned then and squared her shoulders at Kane. “I know this is none of my business, but why now? Why does he need to come back now?”

“You’re right, it’s none of your business.”

She stared back at him for a minute more before making her way to the door. “It’s dangerous to send me after him, are you sure you want this risk?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Just keep in mind I do need him alive.”

She nodded and walked through the door, leaving Lara wondering what the hell all that was about.

“Why does Malcolm need to return?”



He didn't look at her as he answered. "Because we need his help. Nick's death wasn't the end of this and you know it."

"And what makes you so sure Malcolm would help us? He's the one who set us up."

"Because he is all we have."

The End

## *About the Author*

From the moment Eliza read her first erotic romance novel several years ago, she knew she had found her niche and realized that her dream was passing her by. So after years of thinking about it she finally grabbed her laptop and wrote. These days she likes her stories hot and spicy whether they be contemporary, fantasy or paranormal and will write in whatever genre her imagination has conjured that day.

Eliza lives in beautiful North Carolina and spends her days dividing her time between writing erotic romance, her full-time job as a marketing manager and raising her two daughters.