



Loose Id

The book cover features a central female character with long, flowing red hair and green eyes, looking directly at the viewer. She is flanked by two male characters: one on the left with a goatee and blue eyes, and one on the right with dark hair and brown eyes. The background is a vibrant mix of purple, pink, and orange, with wispy, ethereal smoke or energy swirling around the characters. The title 'Loose Id' is at the top in a white serif font. The author's name 'CAITLYN WILLOWS' is at the bottom in a gold serif font. The main title 'Into the Wild' is in a large, stylized script font with a pink-to-white gradient.

Into the
Wild

CAITLYN WILLOWS

Into the Heart 3:
Into the Wild

Caitlyn Willows



Into the Heart 3: Into the Wild

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About this Title

Genre: Paranormal Shape-shifter Ménage

Series: Into the Heart; **Previous Title:** *Into the Night*

They've bonded as friends, working side by side over the last six months — jaguar shifter, human, and calico cat. Now a freak lab accident bonds Cristian, Jeremy, and Lupe as lovers.

Lupe delights in her new human form. Wishes *can* come true. They made her human and gave her the men she loves. She will defeat anyone who dares threaten her new status and her men.

Jeremy thrills yet fears his new role as shape-shifting jaguar, but his relationship with Lupe and Cristian are more than he ever dreamed. The mysteries left to be resolved and the people trying to kill them taint it all. One thing he knows...no one will separate them.

As for Cristian... He's been blessed with love where he never expected to find it. Now a force from beyond tells him he created a monster only he can destroy. How can he do so knowing it could cost him the two people he loves the most? Or is he the monster he fears?

Publisher's Note: *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play/intercourse, ménage (m/f/m).*

Chapter One

The soft whirr of the centrifuge hypnotized Cristian Duarte. He stared, unblinking, while the red digital numbers ticked down. There was nothing else to do at this point but wait and hope.

It had to work. Please let it work.

He was running out of DNA. Replicating what he had had failed so far. Each time he needed an original source, and with Rose dead, there was little of the original DNA remaining. He'd extracted it from her toothbrush, hairbrush, the sheets where she'd last slept, and the ground soaked with the blood from her murder.

The memory stabbed through his gut. Her big brown eyes had stared lifelessly at the stars, her mouth frozen in a scream she didn't have time to utter. The coppery stench of blood had tainted the air, mingling with the stench of the wildfires that had plagued the surrounding area, creating a horror to add to those already crowded in his head. Her throat had been ripped open with one massive bite. She'd never seen it coming, never had the chance to defend herself.

Cristian closed his eyes. Only minutes prior to her death, his clan had been enjoying a well-deserved run in Balboa Park, never realizing death would visit them. Rose's death blow had been delivered from a threat they never knew existed—mountain lions, another clan of shape-shifters. Until a year ago, the mountain lions hadn't known about the jaguar clan either, and they weren't happy about the discovery.

The mountain lions were volatile and quick to defend their people from outside threats. Cristian couldn't really blame them. They'd lost everything to humans. And discovering other shape-shifters had brought to life stories they'd thought were myths. Tales from their ancestors of other shifters, of wars fought and civilizations destroyed. They were prepared to do whatever it took to protect themselves and their lands, even if it meant killing what they didn't understand.

Finally an uneasy peace was forged between their two clans. A treaty set in place. However, suspicions still lingered on both sides, and grief still clenched Cristian's heart.

He lined up the fifteen petri dishes into three rows of five, then laid out two glass pipettes, in the hope keeping busy would banish the memory. It didn't work.

The jaguar clan had lost a woman that dark night six months ago...and the children she carried. All their hopes and dreams for a future were now dust on the wind, Rose and her babies' ashes mingled with Mother Earth, as was custom. Cristian wished he could join them and was ashamed to admit he'd thought about it more times than was healthy. He'd kept those feelings to himself and poured out his grief and rage in body-racking sobs each night. Soaking one of Rose's pillowcases with his tears while he cried, then masturbating in a desperate attempt to reconnect with her. He knew he wasn't the only one who cried. Her death cut the clan to the core of their being. She was their heart, their hope for the future.

It was one of those things they didn't discuss; doing so would release the floodgates holding back all the grief and anger pent up from centuries of loss. Their homes and cities destroyed; family, friends, and lovers gone forever. When one was generally long-lived, forever was a very long time. Joining them in death...

Cristian swallowed against the pain. A coward's way out or a merciful end? He shook the darkness away. Death would mean a complete loss of hope. He refused to accept it. Two friends helped keep him whole. He wouldn't lay grief over his death upon their shoulders. Jeremy and Lupe deserved better than that.

He couldn't say when he took that step away from the dark abyss or what prompted his new plan. At some point, he realized Lupe had given him a reason to live, and Jeremy, the faith to try. Once he set foot on that path—remaining alive—nothing deterred him. What was the sense of having a state-of-the-art laboratory if not to use it to its fullest potential? New hope bolstered his morale, followed quickly by one failure after the other. He carried on, though, determined to find the solution, to continue setting measures in place for success.

He'd resurrect Rose or die trying.

“Brrrow?”

Smiling, he glanced down at the calico cat threading herself between his legs. Lupe truly had been his lifeline to sanity these last months. They'd met one day when he was helping Wyatt

and Trina Caldwell move. Lupe had let Cristian know in no uncertain terms that she deemed him worthy enough of her attention. Cristian had bought Trina's old house, and Lupe moved in with him. However, neither of them had seen the place in months. The lab he currently did his research in had become their sanctuary; the sprawling mansion above it, their home.

He hated the cavernous house but loved the superior, high-tech lab. And it didn't take Cristian long to realize why Jeremy Gibson had moved into the house—why go home when everything you needed was right here?

It probably wasn't the wisest decision to have a cat in a lab, but Lupe was her own feline and would have her way. It helped that she was respectful of the experiments he and Jeremy worked on. Lupe's presence helped him and Jeremy deal with any residual loneliness and isolation as well, though that was nonexistent with his best friend by his side 24-7.

Lupe made sure they ate, comforted them when disappointment dragged them both down, and best of all, gave them unconditional love. All she demanded in return was affection, food, and to sleep in one of their beds. She never failed to make him smile or lift his spirits, and she was better than any girlfriend he'd ever had.

Cristian squatted down to her level. She batted the buttons on his lab coat, then tapped her paw against his chin. "No worries, little warrior." He smiled when he said her nickname. The little cat had earned the title honorably when she'd fought a member of the mountain lion clan and won, paws down. Of course, that made her not very popular with that faction of shape-shifters, but to Cristian's jaguar clan, Lupe could do no wrong.

"What the hell is that cat doing in here?"

Cristian stiffened. Okay, perhaps one member of the jaguar clan wasn't a Lupe fan. Barry Page had always had his weasel-faced snout stuck so far in the rules that he shit protocol. Cristian watched as he trotted down the stairs and stormed their way. The loose black trousers Barry wore rippled under his forceful stride, the matching shirt molding to his torso. The color rarely varied. Barry claimed it helped remind him of his true self and their heritage, suggesting *he* was the only one who did so.

Lupe arched into the hand Cristian ran over her back, then cast her sage green gaze in Barry's direction and instantly dismissed him with a flick of her tail. Cristian tried not to laugh.

He'd flicked his jaguar tail at Barry more times than he could count over their long association. Barry just wasn't someone he was eager to see.

"Leave her alone, Barry." Distracted as always, Jeremy still didn't hesitate to come to Lupe's defense. He was always so quiet, so focused on his work, that Cristian usually forgot he was in the same room with him.

As Jeremy's reward, Lupe slinked his way and twined herself around his legs. "You're my best girl, Lups." Jeremy gave her head a quick rub.

Barry snorted. "She's your *only* girl. You never leave the estate."

"Everything I want is here, and I've got a hand that does just fine for personal *tension*." Jeremy held up two beakers, one with clear liquid, the other, blue-green, studying them under ultraviolet light. "I'm on a roll here, and women have a tendency to sidetrack me."

Cristian had never seen a man more determined to prove or disprove his own theory. Jeremy's dedication matched Cristian's. They shared the lab—Jeremy on one end of the long stainless steel counter, Cristian on the other—bounced theories off each other, and never once called the other one to task for seeking answers.

Barry picked a long blond hair from his sleeve, grimaced, then fed it to the flame on Jeremy's Bunsen burner. "Then maybe you should try a man."

Jeremy grinned and watched the thickening liquids swirl in their glass containers. "Who says I haven't? You offering?"

That was a door Jeremy really didn't want to open. Barry could get...possessive. Cristian knew that from experience. In a clan whose numbers were dwindling, one got relief where one could, or went outside the clan, something Barry would never do. Barry didn't necessarily take what he wanted, but once he got something, he wasn't inclined to let go.

Jeremy poured a drop of blue-green liquid into the clear. "I could go for a blowjob. Just make sure you zip me up when you're done."

Cristian smothered his laugh. It came out a sputtered snicker instead and earned him Barry's infamous snake-eyed glare.

"Whoa. Didn't expect that." Jeremy drew back from the beaker he held. Lupe craned her neck for a look at what he was talking about. His concoction was now a small vortex of purple and gold. He poured the contents of both beakers into a larger one. He lifted the container to the

light, his grin widening. The vortex grew, spinning faster. Pinpoints of glowing white flecked within. "It looks like a tiny nebula or galaxy. A star factory."

"Just make sure it's only yourself you blow up when that shit explodes," Barry said.

"And deprive you of the pleasure that is me?" Jeremy's grin widened more, his brown eyes glimmering. "Never."

Lupe meowed and rubbed hard against him.

"Jealous, puss?" Barry laughed when she growled at him.

"Don't call her that." Cristian watched the centrifuge's timer count down the final ten. "She doesn't like it."

"What's wrong, *puss*? Don't like a little competition?" Barry swiped for her, grabbing her tail when Lupe tried to dodge him.

"Let her go!" Her yowl barely covered his and Jeremy's protests.

She hissed and rolled onto her back, claws and teeth bared. Jeremy kicked Barry's shoulder, sloshing his experiment on the floor. It splashed onto Lupe. She whirled around, eyes wide with fear. Barry grabbed the scruff of her neck and hoisted her into the air, holding the spitting little cat at arm's length.

Cristian and Jeremy took a step in his direction. However, as Cristian was more than aware, Lupe was completely capable of defending herself. She swung her lower legs up and speared her back claws into Barry's forearm. He screeched and let her go. Lupe landed on all fours. She gave him a dismissive *chuff* and a flick of her tail, then tucked behind Cristian's legs to clean her fur.

"If you had more experience with women, that might not have happened." Cristian couldn't resist the jab. Barry deserved the rebuke and the bloody claw marks going down his arm. Cristian scooped Lupe into his arms. "It's probably not a good idea to lick that, little one. Let's get you cleaned up. No water. I promise."

She purred and kneaded her paws into his chest. The centrifuge beeped out the end of its cycle. Great. His own experiment was ready for the next step. Lupe curled herself around his neck, leaving his hands free. He popped the top on the device and lifted out the tray of vials.

"I see there's no offer to help *me*." Barry snagged a wad of paper towels from the stack on the opposite counter and dabbed at his wounds.

"You had it coming." Cristian watched Jeremy study the glowing mass. Judging from his frown, it looked like another failure. The solution appeared to be losing momentum. Cristian felt his pain. He'd thought for sure Jeremy had had the breakthrough he'd been looking for.

"I'd say 'fuck you,' but I wouldn't want either of you to get your hopes up." Barry pressed the towels against his arm.

"Our loss. More's the pity." Cristian set the vials beside the petri dishes he'd prepared earlier, then carried Lupe over to the sink counter against the wall to wipe her fur. "Did you come down here for a reason or just to harass us about our work again?"

Barry smacked the paper towels into the biohazard trash can and stomped his way. "Your cougar's waiting for you upstairs."

Frieda was there? This early in the morning? Was the sun even up yet? What the hell could she possibly want this time of day? She was a beautiful woman, but gods, was she a pain in the ass. If he didn't need her for the next phase of his experiment, he would have ended it long ago. Hell, he never would have become involved with her in the first place. Beauty only went so far; the woman had no substance.

"Mountain lion, Barry. Have a little respect. You know they're very picky about their name."

"Po-tay-to, po-tah-to. Mountain lion, cougar, puma. Lupe or *puss*."

Lupe growled at him. Barry wasn't making any friends here today.

"Who gives a fuck? She's not happy you've kept her waiting, and she sure as hell can't keep her hands to herself. She was all over me."

Typical Frieda. That's why it was so easy to lure her into his bed. She had the morals of an alley cat, not the bearing of a potential queen.

"I'm not very thrilled that one of them is at this estate."

Cristian blotted a heavy paper towel over Lupe's thick fur. Deep purrs rumbled up. "It's part of the treaty the clans agreed to. The treaty you helped broker, remember?" Unrestricted

access to everything the other possessed—and that included communal homes like the former Prentice estate—and all technology.

They were supposed to be open books to each other, in the hope their clans could benefit from one another's knowledge and grow and survive. It was only a matter of time before they all started working in each other's labs. Cristian hated the idea. They could use the lab at the Braden Science Institute all they wanted, but he sure as hell didn't want to be rubbing elbows with them at this lab. Here there was the luxury of privacy. Neither he nor Jeremy wanted to give that up. Not even to the jaguar clan. Considering Barry's near-constant presence, Cristian suspected tensions and suspicions were mounting at Braden over their exclusive use of the Prentice lab. It could be worse. Fortunately, Wyatt and Joaquin were too busy with business and babies. However, that left the worrying and grunt work to Barry.

"Yeah, I know all too well. Trust me, I'm monitoring the situation." Barry leaned against the counter and crossed his arms. Lupe turned her back to him. "I don't like Frieda up there unsupervised. What if she comes down here?"

"They've all been down here before, and experiments are frequent on both sides of the fence. They won't know what we're doing." Cristian parted Lupe's fur, chasing a drop that wiggled down to her skin. She sat down with a resigned sigh and started to clean Barry's blood off her paws.

"Do either of you know what you're doing?" Barry snapped his finger toward Jeremy. "Our Mensa genius is over there trying to disprove his own theory that celestial impacts helped create us shape-shifters in the first place. There are some who would view that as blasphemy. It's a slap in the face to all that our people revere."

True, though Cristian had been too wrapped up in his own quest to think about the religious significance to both their peoples—jaguar and mountain lion. Considering everything the jaguar had been through, it was hard for Cristian to believe in unseen gods anymore.

One thing both clans had in common was the belief they were born of star dust. Jeremy's linking their ancestral origins with impact craters on Earth seemed to support that. Now he was trying to prove otherwise.

"And you—" Barry thrust that scolding finger at him. Cristian fought the urge to snap it in two. "If they knew what *you* were doing. Good gods, Cristian, you're trying to clone Rose!"

He bowed his head. Lupe braced her paws against Cristían's chest and butted her nose against his. He scooped her into his arms and let her cuddle him. He loved the feel of her soft fur between his fingers. It reminded him of Rose's when she shifted—soft, thick. Of the old days when their biggest worry was planning the next celebration of life.

Barry dropped his hand on Cristían's shoulder. "I miss her too. You know that. But this is *wrong*, especially now that the rest of our people have moved on to new relationships." He might as well have said *leprosy*; his tone implied it.

Cristían shrugged off his touch and set Lupe on her feet. She sauntered over to see Jeremy. "I haven't moved on."

"Then what do you call Frieda?" He jerked his thumb toward the stairs that led up into the main house. "Much as I dislike our association with these shifters, I certainly don't want us all to come to blows over a love affair gone wrong. If she's only a diversion for you, end it now, before things get out of control."

Cristían squared his shoulders and faced the shorter man. "I can't. I need Frieda. If I'm successful, Rose will need a compatible host body. With her feline-shifter traits, Frieda fits that role to perfection."

Barry's eyes bugged out. "Gods of hell, Cristian! You're no better than a skinwalker!"

Rage boiled up inside him. They'd fought that entity for years—an evil directly responsible for the genocide of Cristían's clan. There was no greater insult. Cristían's claws extended as his hands morphed into his black jaguar form. The *clink* of glass as Jeremy set his work aside cut through his anger. A moment later, he felt Jeremy's heat next to him. The intent was clear—Jeremy was making a stand with him, taking sides. Cristían refused to let his friend's blood spill over words, and fighting among themselves wasn't going to help matters. But Cristían wouldn't stand there and be insulted either.

He willed himself to shift back to human and seated the form in place with a deep breath.

"Get out," he told Barry, jerking his chin toward the stairs. "While I'm still able to remember you loved Rose as much as the rest of us."

Barry's lip curled. "If you're planning to do this, you've already forgotten." A crisp pivot carried him away. His soft soles tapped on the linoleum, then scuffed up the stairs. Barry's gaze

was locked on his cell phone as he punched in numbers, most likely to tattle to Wyatt and Joaquin. The door at the top opened and banged shut.

Blessed silence filled the lab. Cristian pulled in the strands of peace Jeremy and Lupe offered, shoved aside a sudden headache at the base of his skull, and returned to his experiment. Static arced from his fingers to the stainless steel table. Cristian muttered a curse and jerked his hand back. Slender bolts of electricity spread across the table and everything on it before it finally dissipated.

“What the hell...” One stride brought Jeremy to his side. “That shouldn't have happened.”

A loud *pop* cut in before Cristian could reply.

He and Jeremy swung their gazes to the reenergized liquid at Jeremy's workstation. It swirled, sizzled, and grew with every millisecond. *Pop* turned to *bang*, and it doubled in size. Sparks shot upward, showering miniature fireworks everywhere. Some kissed the floor spill. The droplets came to life. Spiral bands spread out and began to rotate counterclockwise. Lupe growled and backed away, one foot at a time. Her fur shimmered where the solution had splashed her earlier. And the mass in the beaker continued to grow, to pulse in time with the bands on the floor and the remnants dampening Lupe's fur.

Gods, what had they created? It looked like the thing was communicating with all its parts!

“Uh-oh,” Jeremy muttered.

Not something one wanted to hear in a lab.

“I think we need to get the hell out of here.” Jeremy scooped Lupe up in one arm. He grabbed his laptop in the other hand, leaving the cords behind while he kept one eye on the out-of-control experiment.

Cristian did the same, shoving as many of the petri dishes as possible into the pockets of his lab coat and praying he could get them to safety without breaking them. Then he stacked the vials on the laptop. They were the last part of Rose he possessed. He clutched the vials and the computer to his chest and spun around for the stairs.

Time slowed. Each step felt weighted. The roar built. Then the flash—gold, purple, beautiful. Breathtaking beauty, earsplitting noise, and then...nothing.

Chapter Two

Too many thoughts crowded into Jeremy's spinning head. He couldn't grab one long enough to analyze it.

"*Cristian?*" His friend's name echoed in his mind, but he couldn't get a sound past his throat.

Am I dead? Weight pressed on his chest, making breathing difficult. He stared up at the twisted remains of the suspended ceiling, mesmerized by the fact that there was still light. A blast like that should have taken out the electricity.

Then he looked out the corner of his eye. The light was coming from *outside* the lab area. The other rooms in the huge basement seemed to be safe, though, and since the house hadn't caved in on them, that meant it stood as well. Maybe things weren't as bad as they seemed.

Then why couldn't he move?

"*Cristian?*"

Still no voice. The explosion must have deafened him. Everything felt muffled, like he was underwater. He could have screamed and not have heard it. Panic set in at the thought of being permanently deaf. He tamped it down. *That* might be the least of his problems.

Why couldn't he catch a good breath? His skin crawled, and his heart raced a mile a minute. What the hell had he done? If he'd killed Cristian...

His vision shimmered. Tears. Jeremy's fear lessened. He had to be alive. Dead people didn't cry, did they?

"*Cristian!*"

Definitely no sound. He would have felt the vibration in his throat. Damn it, why the hell couldn't he talk? Oh shit... Was he paralyzed? That's why he couldn't breathe, why his arms and

legs and everything else felt like he was in a vise—squeezing, releasing. Tears trickled from his eyes and settled in his ringing ears.

Stop it! He couldn't let panic overwhelm him. Paralyzed meant he wouldn't feel anything, and Jeremy could damn well feel. He just couldn't move, talk, or breathe.

Trapped. Yes, I'm trapped under something. Not that it made him feel much better, but at least his fear ebbed. Barry would have heard the blast and gotten help. The hovering pain in the ass was finally good for something. All Jeremy needed to do was hang in there. Which would be a lot easier to accomplish if he knew Cristian was all right.

He focused on moving his hand, trying to feel for obstructions. It felt four times heavier than normal. He couldn't get his fingers to work. Everything felt...squishy beneath his hand.

Oh God, a body? Lupe? He'd had the cat cradled in one arm before the accident, his laptop in the other. There was no way either could have survived. Damn, he loved that cat.

He forced his hand to move again. Pain sliced through his palm. He jerked away from the shards of glass. He could move! It'd be great if he could have heaved a sigh of relief to go along with that revelation.

Jeremy slid his hand to his stomach, hoping he could find and remove whatever was on top of him. It was soft and warm. A body? Panic rushed in.

Too light to be Cristian. Too heavy to be Lupe. He refused to entertain any possibility that it might be a part of Cristian.

Gut wound?

No no no!

Frowning, Jeremy focused his attention once more on moving his left hand. His fingers tingled with that pins-and-needles feeling, as if they'd been asleep. He waited for the feeling to subside. It grew instead, crawling up his arm, over his shoulders, and down the other side. His arms felt like they were swelling, compressing...like he was being squeezed by a giant. His vision shimmered again, golden this time, with not a tear in sight. Like a mist surrounded him. Or magic.

Or the other side?

Jeremy let the thought remain. It wasn't so bad after all. A part of him longed to escape his body, and he realized that's what was trying to break free. His soul wanted to soar. All he had to do was let go.

Beautiful. So beautiful.

Weight eased from his chest and torso. He could breathe now. A chill shuddered over him. He missed the warmth. Something brushed over his stomach. Hair. Soft, silky.

Where were his lab coat and T-shirt? As soon as that thought occurred, small hands pushed both items farther up his torso. A hot tongue rasped over his ribs. Jeremy tried to move. His body refused to cooperate.

More licks followed the path of each rib and stroked his nipples. His cock recognized the action long before his brain kicked in. He was being loved. And damn, it felt good! God, it'd been a year since he'd had sex. He'd been too absorbed with work and uncovering the mysteries of the world to nurture a relationship. Too focused on actually using the intelligence he'd been born with, rather than squander it. Too thankful at the second chance the universe had granted him to waste it chasing sex.

And God, how he'd missed it! Jeremy didn't realize it until this moment. The touch of another, sweet and caring. He hadn't lied to Barry—his hand had been more than sufficient. How could he have been so foolish to think he didn't need human contact? He'd gone from one extreme to the other—lazy, woman-chasing bum to reclusive genius. Until Cristian, he hadn't developed any friendships, and he'd had no real ones before. No one wanted an irresponsible asshole for a friend, and women wanted him only for the size of his cock. So had more than a few men. All had the same goal—to see if his dick was really as big as rumor claimed and if it could fit in their bodies. The answer to both was a resounding *yes!* and Jeremy had no problem pounding it in wherever and whenever they wanted.

It was a sad way to live. Jeremy was glad he'd finally seen the light and changed his ways. If he lost Cristian and that little cat...

“Cristian!”

Jeremy tried to call out again. The attempt choked off as a tongue dived under the waistband of his jeans. His cock lengthened, searching for the source of heaven. Long hair tickled over his stomach; his muscles rippled under the caress. Those small hands again—a

woman's hands—curled into the waistband and tugged. When they went no farther than his hip bones, she stopped.

He managed to stare down his nose. Her long hair was a riot of color—black and red, with some white thrown in. Quizzical sage green eyes stared at his swollen crotch.

A human Lupe? Impossible! Now Jeremy knew he was hallucinating. That was the only logical explanation. Hurt from the explosion, paralyzed, clearly in shock, hovering on the brink of life and death, and he'd conjured up a hot nude woman who looked like the human version of Lupe. If he were on his way out, heading for the great beyond, the other side, whatever, well then, he was going to enjoy this last fantasy before he went.

The woman—Lupe—drew back and pressed her hand against his cock. Again and again and again. Like he was a fucking pop-up toy. The pressure was killing him. He would have given just about anything to be able to move, to get the zipper down and shove his cock down her throat.

Not content with her sweet torture, Lupe knelt between his thighs, pressed both hands to his crotch, and kneaded him. She was driving him insane.

Jeremy snarled. The sound frightened him as much as it did her. She jerked up, head cocked, her fingers poised like claws over his erection. The threat wilted his hard-on, but not for long.

She quickly discovered his zipper. She flicked the tab a couple of times, then pinched it between thumb and forefinger and pulled.

He felt every tooth release, and his cock surged into the gap it created. A gap she explored with the tip of her finger. He tried to thrust into the touch... Nothing. He still couldn't move. He was hers to do with as she pleased, and he wished she'd do it now, because he was loving every second. She jammed her hands under the fly button and tugged. Its release earned her smile. She hooked her nails into the waistband again and dragged his clothing down. His cock sprang into blessed freedom. Lupe jumped, her eyes wide and locked on his penis. Then she laughed.

The sound seemed to surprise her as much as Jeremy's snarl did him. She lifted one hand to her mouth but stopped short to stare at her fingers.

"I'm...different." Puzzlement masked her heart-shaped face; then wonder filled her eyes. Fingers fluttered to her lips. "I can speak." She laughed again and pressed her fingers against her throat. "Speak, speak, speak." More laughter.

She stretched her hands in front of her and slowly turned them to study her palms. Her wide-eyed gaze drifted down her arms and to her small, pert breasts. She cupped them, flicking her fingers over the hard nipples.

Jeremy managed a sigh. He'd once bragged to a woman that he'd die with a hard-on. Little did he realize...

"I like these." Her broad smile chased the confusion away. "It feels *so* good to touch them."

And looked so hot, he was ready to die a semihappy man. What sane man wouldn't want to breathe his last watching a woman play with her tits? Even an imaginary woman. Right now she was real enough for him.

"You like it too, don't you?" Still tugging one nipple, she reached over and tweaked his.

Jeremy growled, the sound rough and raw in his throat. She leaned closer, her long hair tickling his chest. She flicked her tongue around each nipple, then lapped downward to where his dick wept with anticipation.

Wiggling between his thighs, she tucked her small breasts against his balls, tripling his agony, and licked the precum away. A year without sex, without any touch save that of his hand, played havoc with Jeremy's control. He listened as she smacked her lips and approved his taste with a soft *mmm*.

The pins and needles were back, this time all over his body, tingling, burning, arrowing down to his aching balls. His body undulated from deep inside. Not like he rode the tide, but as if he *were* the ocean. He closed his eyes against the golden mist. Clenched his jaw when her breath washed over his cock. Jeremy felt her warm lips before they touched him. His cock jerked when she suckled at the base. His balls crawled deep into his body.

Goddamn, my toes hurt!

That's what happens when a guy goes so long without sex, an inner voice taunted.

Jeremy wasn't laughing. It hurt—everything hurt—and yet felt so damn good at the same time. She worked her lips with hot nibbles up to the tip of his cock. His orgasm pooled behind each one. She paused at the crown. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't move. Pain...pleasure.

Her mouth closed over him. Fire. Ecstasy.

Jeremy screamed with the force of his orgasm. No...*yowled*. Everything inside him poured out. Power...strength...fear...panic.

His eyes flashed open to see that golden mist. The woman backed away, her eyes wide more from curiosity than fear. All he wanted was to drag her back and pound his cock into her. His feet hurt so much. His arms and legs felt crushed. This was it. This was death.

So unfair, when he'd finally found a real life. God, he was going to miss Cristían. And the real Lupe too. Where were they?

Let them be okay.

He squeezed his eyes shut against the inevitable as another wave of pain overcame him.

Chapter Three

A blanket of shimmering stars swaddled Cristian. He was safe and protected, neither warm nor cold—perfect. Who knew death could be so beautiful? But where was the out-of-body experience? There was no feeling of separation from his body. No watching the scene from the ceiling before fading into the ether world.

Jeremy...Lupe...

The force consuming him washed his concern away. Cristian was no longer of the body but of the mind. A void opened at his crown, black and endless. Fear swooped in.

Skinwalker.

The word conjured realities born of a million nightmares. An entity that could and did steal the souls and bodies of his people. Would the void clear and Cristian find himself standing in the underground cave with the skeletons of his clan littered before him? Had his clan's final battle with the skinwalkers a year ago extracted one last victim—himself?

An image of the *cenote* invaded his head. Cristian couldn't tell if it was real or imagined. A ceiling curved high overhead. An arch above, with holes eroded through from millennia of rain and nature's destruction, let the sunshine beam down into a vast pool of crystal blue water. Crevices in the wall filled the pool, trickling down water like a garden fountain. Pools of water were stair-stepped higher and lower; water so clear, he could see to the rocky bottom ten feet below. *Magnificent* didn't come close to describing it. How anything so beautiful could house something so evil...

Cristian shivered against a chill and asked for salvation. The image clicked off. Fear swept away, leaving nothing. All that he was had been wiped clean. A blank slate.

His essence slipped into the void and hovered at the edge. A new portal expanded before him, deep dark violet, and blossomed into a vast cloud. More peace fell over Cristian—

unconditional love and the understanding that went with it. He'd found a home he never realized existed, and he never wanted to leave.

A gold cloud drifted into the violet. It coalesced into a denser ball and started to spin, until it resembled a small galaxy orbiting a tight, oval path. A path that drew closer to him with every pass. When it reached the edge, the ball plunged through the portal. Cristian saw the gold cloud swell into white light behind his eyes. Petals formed and unfurled. More white light spilled out, radiating with the force of a thousand supernovas.

Cristian's head ached from the pressure. The more he fought the light, the more it hurt. He begged for the euphoria he'd had before. A tendril of white light slipped past his meager defenses down to his throat. He gasped for breath and felt the light wrap around his heart. The caress soothed his pain, calmed the panic, and told him all would be well.

With a psychic nod, he let go. And the knowledge of the ages and all the worlds that had ever existed became his. Information poured into his brain, too fast to comprehend. Cristian didn't try to make sense of it. He merely accepted. Strength came with the knowledge. He felt it in his muscles, in the structure of his cells. He knew everything...*was* everything.

"Cristian?"

Jeremy's voice...in his head. The reason why came to him instantly, as did other revelations. Jeremy needed him now, or he'd die.

Cristian begged the powers that be—if that's what this was called—to hurry. The tendrils zipped to all parts of his body and just as quickly retreated, resetting his system as they went. The vortices of energy spun in sync, great cogs in the force of which he was now a part. White petals folded back into the gold ball and reconnected with the violet cloud. Its mission complete, Cristian expected a door to slam between it and him. But while the gold dispersed into a shower of gold sparkles, the violet cloud and the link it forged remained. He didn't ask why. He knew. He knew everything, and the weight tore a hole in his heart.

That's when the veil slipped into place. The information was gone, leaving only snippets at the edges of his mind to access when he was ready...and not a moment before. He'd been tested and had failed. Cristian wasn't sure if that devastated or relieved him. He'd go with relieved for now. Having the collective knowledge of the universe was an onerous burden.

He flexed his fingers and felt new strength coursing through him. The powers had blessed him with a gift from their encounter. Cristian nodded, accepting the honor, and vowed he'd use it wisely.

A pained *rrawow!* bolted him upright. Glass shards rained to the floor. His lab coat looked like it had been bathed in acid. It hung in tatters from his shoulders. Holes punctured the dark blue pullover underneath, but his jeans and sneakers were still intact. He held out no hope that any of the vials or petri dishes had survived. The gods only knew where his laptop had landed.

Cristian shoved through the debris trail toward where he'd last seen Jeremy. Desks, chairs, and equipment moved from his path with the merest flick of his hands. The new strength, though it served him well, was also a bit unnerving. Daunting, even.

Jeremy lay in a ten-foot-wide depression carved into the floor from the blast. He twisted in the throes of his first shift, an erection waving above his jeans, which had been shoved down to his hips, his lab coat and T-shirt bunched up to his chest, and a naked woman kneeling at his feet.

Dear gods! He blinked. *Lupe?* The green eyes, petite build, and tumble of multicolored hair left little doubt. *Well, well.* If Jeremy could be transformed, why not the little cat?

A sea of glass surrounded them. Any movement would cut them, and neither would understand how to deal with the wounds in their present state. Both were caught up in the wonder and lust of first shift.

Cristian ripped off what remained of his lab coat to brush the area clear. One sweep of his arm scattered the glass to the edge of the crater. The power he possessed shocked him in his tracks. It seemed he'd been blessed with more than just the gift of enhanced strength. *Shit.* How would he know if the next ability he discovered would kill the two he longed to save?

A single word filtered into his head. *Trust.*

In who? Or what? Myself? Or others?

The answer never came, and he wasn't going to stand there waiting for it. One thing he did know—Jeremy would be suffocated by his clothing if Cristian didn't help him undress. If his helping contributed to Jeremy's demise, he prayed it would be a merciful death and take him as well.

And what about Lupe? his conscience asked.

One thing at a time, damn it! He hurried onward.

Lupe's startled green eyes jerked his way, momentarily freezing him. She was a pretty cat, but she was a beautiful woman.

"It's okay, little warrior. It's okay." He cupped her cheek, then grabbed Jeremy's sneaker and yanked it off. Claws sprang through his socks.

"Can you help me undress him?" he asked Lupe. "His clothes will suffocate him otherwise."

He shifted his hand into a jaguar paw and used his razor-sharp talons to rip Jeremy's jeans up the leg.

"I can't. I don't have those anymore, Cristian."

The fact that she could talk shocked the hell out of him, but there would be time to analyze that later. "It's okay, little one. Grab the socks and try to pull them off." He sliced down the other jeans leg and yanked off the second shoe. Lupe snagged the socks by the tops and rolled them free of his feet and claws. Jeremy's paws expanded, and he yowled again.

"Hang in there, buddy. Inward and calm. You'll learn to control it in no time." Cristian grabbed Jeremy's T-shirt and lab coat and ripped both up the front. Buttons shot skyward and clattered to the bare concrete.

"I can't move, Cristian."

Cristian managed a smile. "You're scared, that's all. We all are our first time, even if we're prepared."

"You can hear me!"

"I can." He tapped his head. "In here. You'll also be able to understand me when I speak. Hang in there. After the first shift, there's no further pain involved." He ripped the sleeves and ran his hand down the newly sprouted black fur. "You did it, Jeremy. Your experiment worked." He wouldn't allow himself to think beyond that.

Jeremy's brown eyes glowed amber, the color partly from shifting and partly from the joy that he'd succeeded. His body shimmered, and he whipped to all fours in full black jaguar form.

"Beautiful." Cristian ran his hand down Jeremy's spine.

Jeremy arched his back into the caress and butted his head against Cristian's. *"Thank God you're all right."*

He dug his fingers into Jeremy's soft ears. "I can't believe you managed to start undressing. You had to be half paralyzed with fear."

"I was. She's the one who got the jeans down." He curled his jaguar body around Cristian to stare at Lupe. *"She...uhm..."*

Her head popped up on a puzzled frown. "You told Barry you wanted a blowjob. Did you not? Did I not do it correctly? I made it spit like I've seen you make it do."

Jeremy's tail fanned the air. Clearly he had no response. Embarrassment was the same, no matter what the species. Cristian was shocked she had heard them mindspeak. It wasn't a skill the other shifters, the mountain lions, possessed, as far as he knew.

"I'm sure you did it just fine, Lupe," Cristian answered for him.

"I've watched Frieda do that to you many times. There's very little blowing involved." She gave them a look of cat disdain that was pure Lupe. "I don't care for her, you know. I would be pleased to see her go. I certainly did not wish to have to share Jeremy with Barry on top of that. You both are mine. I love you."

"It is Lupe. I thought I was hallucinating." Jeremy's black head jerked Cristian's way. *"How?"*

"We'll figure that out soon," Cristian said. "Right now we have to help you control your shifting and get you back to human form before we can get out of here." *If* they could get out of there.

"And me?" Lupe asked. "Will I have to go back to what I was?" She glanced down at her breasts. "Because I'm very fond of these." She cupped her breasts and thumbed her nipples. "This feels so good!"

Cristian's cock surged to life. Pheromones peppered the air. Jeremy quivered with the need to mate, a feeling Cristian knew all too well at the moment.

"No wonder you like to touch them so much." She thrust her bosom toward him. "Do you want to touch mine?"

Jeremy rumbled a response for both of them and curled around Cristian. Cristian dug his fingers into Jeremy's thick fur to keep them off Lupe's tempting tits. Driven by the heady lust of sex pheromones from two newly minted shifters, he wanted her more than anything. The craving

to mate had them all in its grip. Duty prevailed. As an experienced shifter, his obligation was to see that they transitioned well.

Cristían reached for her hands and pulled them down. “Not right—”

Jeremy mounted him from behind, barbed jaguar cock hard and stabbing for entry, despite the fact Cristían still had his jeans on. The need to shift and claim the dominant role crawled over Cristían. “Not now, buddy.” He batted Jeremy's ears and pushed him off. Jeremy snarled.

Cristían cuffed his head. “Control. We need to get out of here, and you need to—”

“Ooo, Cristían!” Lupe squealed. “Touch me *here!*” She had her hands shoved in her crotch, working her clit.

He grabbed her wrists and jabbed his foot in Jeremy's chest. “No, Lupe, not now.” He pulled her hands to her sides. “No touching of anyone. Focus, please.”

That earned a snort from Jeremy, now pacing a short circuit behind him.

Lupe's lower lip trembled. “You touch Frieda there, but you won't touch me?” Her big green eyes puddled with tears.

Cristían struggled for words to explain. Until a short while ago, Lupe had been a cat. Her world had revolved around instant gratification. Now she was starting to cry, and he'd never felt more helpless.

“Do you not love me? You said you did.”

“Of course I do.” He tried to draw her onto his lap.

Lupe halfheartedly fought the embrace and kicked out at him as she crawled back a few inches. “You said you would always take care of me. Called me your pretty little warrior.” Tears slipped down her cheeks. Lupe frantically batted at them. “No! Water! I'm leaking water!”

Jeremy shoved past him and butted his head between her legs. Lupe toppled backward and wrapped her fingers around his ears. Cristían grabbed Jeremy's haunches. Before he could pull him off her, Jeremy nudged his nose deeper. Lupe gasped and tried to hook her ankles over his thick neck.

“Stop! Now!” Cristían sprouted claws, dug them into Jeremy's back legs, and hauled him back. “You, lie down!”

Jeremy settled at Lupe's toes, tail waving in annoyance. Cristian blessed the stars that Jeremy accepted his alpha role. Had they not already established a close bond, they could have come to blows. They still could, if Cristian didn't diffuse the sex situation.

"Come here, little warrior." He pulled Lupe upright. "There's no need to fear. That's not water. Those are tears. You're crying. You've seen it before. Humans do that when they experience deep emotion." Like the kind he was sure he was going to get when she realized humans needed to bathe. Her fear of water might be enough to make her willing to shift back into a cat.

She scrubbed her fists over her cheeks. "I...need."

"I'll take care of it." He brushed his hand down her tangle of hair.

There was really no other choice. They needed clear heads to get out of there and to return to their original forms. The ramifications of discovery...

A door in his mind opened, letting in a piece of the information he'd received minutes before. The weight sagged his shoulders, scattering the effects the pheromones had on him.

Lupe crawled into his lap. Jeremy edged closer, nudging his nose against Cristian's foot. *This* was friendship and devotion. But would it last in the time to come, the choices to be made? He sighed. Their immediate needs had to come first, or they'd never make it out of the lab.

"Let's get you comfortable." Using Jeremy's clothing as padding, he turned Lupe around and tucked her hips between his open thighs.

She settled her back into his chest with a contented sigh and stretched her legs next to his. Her ass was warm as rain-forest heat nestled against his crotch. Jeremy sniffed her toes, then licked his raspy tongue over the sole of her foot.

Lupe giggled and lifted her other foot to his mouth. Jeremy playfully caught it between his sharp white teeth. Cristian cupped his hand to her wet pussy and palmed her breast. Lupe bowed into the touch on a half mewl, half groan. His cock pulsed, wanting more than ever to be with the other two, rather than a frustrated bystander.

"Have a care, my friend. Your jaws are powerful."

"I need too, Cristian. So bad, my balls are burning."

"Mine too!" Lupe cried out. "The one right here." She shoved her hand under Cristían's to reach her clit.

"I've got it, little one." He eased her fingers away and rubbed slowly.

Another sigh settled her once more.

He remembered how he felt his first time shifting. Then, there'd been a ceremony and others to guide him through the shift and the sex. All Jeremy had were Cristían and the little she-cat writhing between Cristían's legs.

"It's the pheromones from the first shifting. Both of you are overwhelmed and need the release. You need to shift into human form, Jeremy. Focus. Pull in for human. Push out for jaguar. Like a tide that ebbs and flows."

Jeremy dipped his jaguar head in a nod. *"I've been feeling that rock me. It's hard to control right now. All I can think about is sex."* He closed his amber-colored eyes. *"I don't want to hurt her."*

Another thought occurred to Cristían. "Have you mated before, Lupe?"

"Oh yes. But it felt nothing like this. Please...more..." She rolled her hips against his erection.

"Then don't do what I just told Jeremy to do." If it would even work for her.

"Never." She twisted her head around to look at him. "I don't want to go back. I want to stay this way. To be with you, both of you."

Crazy as it sounded, he wanted that too. Now that he'd seen her, held her, Cristían never wanted to let her go. For now he wouldn't think about the obstacles to come. He'd grab this moment and live it...if he could just figure out how to get out of his clothes without having to release her.

"Shh, little one." He brushed his thumb over her full mouth and smiled when her tongue darted out to lick it. His cock pulsed against her hip. His clothing was a blessing in disguise. Without it, what little control he possessed would be screwed. Maybe it already was in this sex-charged atmosphere.

Lupe swung around, astride his lap. He cupped her breast, kneading it until it felt like the hard nipple pierced through to the other side. She tossed her head back and tried to push her

breast deeper into his palm, eyes closed, mouth agape, her long hair tickling the hand he pressed against her ass. Her thighs locked her in place over the ridge of his erection.

Jeremy released a rumbled groan. Cristian felt the sound in his balls. A shimmer built around Jeremy's body as he struggled to master the complexities of shifting while in the throes of first heat. Seeing Lupe ride Cristian's zipper probably didn't help either, though it was doing sweet things to Cristian.

Hand cradling her shoulders, he rolled them forward and sucked Lupe's nipple into his mouth. She cried out and tried to use her legs to drag his pelvis back to hers. He wedged his fingers between them and slid into her wet pussy. Her walls clamped onto his fingers when he burrowed them inside. His cock screamed in protest at being excluded when he thumbed her slippery clit. Nails gripped his shoulders, feeling very much like claws. The sensation called to the jaguar inside. It was the distraction he needed to keep from coming.

He circled her clit and thrust his fingers into her tight body. Sharp pants hitched her breath. Her arms and legs were locked tight around him. Cristian flicked his tongue around her nipple, mimicking the action below. He felt the quake build inside her. The ripple as an orgasm overcame her nearly did him in, but it was nothing compared to the feel of her opening and letting go.

He clutched her close and let her ride it out, burying his face into her neck to inhale her scent. Another groan pulled his head up. Jeremy had done it—finally managed the shift back to human form. He lay sprawled on the floor, panting, his eyes locked on them, his erection beyond full and more than ready.

“Go to him, Lupe,” Cristian said, his voice hoarse and rough. “He needs you.”

She blinked up at him. “And you?”

He cupped her chin and traced her mouth again. Gods, how he wanted to kiss her, to lose himself in her! “I'll be right behind you. Hurry, little one. The man's in true pain.”

She crawled from his lap and over to Jeremy. Jeremy reached for her when she straddled his hips; then he grabbed his cock to guide it to her pussy. Cristian expected her to question what to do, then realized she'd apparently watched humans enough over the years to know. Without hesitation, she slid onto Jeremy's erection. Their moans sliced through Cristian's gut.

Clothes be damned, he couldn't wait a second longer! The pheromones had a choke hold on him, squeezing and squeezing until he could barely breathe from their clutch.

Cristian fumbled to pull down his jeans and briefs while he edged toward the couple on his knees. They were too lost in the wonder of each other to notice him. His cock sprang free when he reached Jeremy's feet. Cristian touched Jeremy's leg to keep him from being startled. All Jeremy did was open wider to give him room. Cristian glided his hand over Lupe's hip. Her skin was hot and smooth.

Jeremy spanned his fingers over her back and pulled her down. She lifted her hips to Cristian. His cock watered for a taste of her tight ass and the feel of Jeremy's cock fucking her from the other side. He traced his finger over the rosette. It clenched under the touch, but she whimpered slightly when he tried to press inside. There would be other times for such play, when they could better prepare her.

Cristian shoved his jeans and briefs down to his knees. Braced on his hands, he leaned over them and aimed his dick for the space between their bodies. He eased in until his balls kissed Jeremy's and the heat from their stomachs cradled his erection.

“Ride us, Lupe.”

And she did, fucking them like she'd done this for years, rather than being a first-timer. Blood filled his pelvis and rushed to his cock and balls. He loved the heat of her body between them, the cushion of Jeremy's sac against his, the scent of sex and pheromones twirling around them.

The portal above his head opened to a new wash of violet and gold. A beam of white shot down his spine and branched out into Lupe and Jeremy. He heard their gasps mingled with his own, felt them all freeze in a millisecond of time. Then the light zinged from its path, yanking their climax with it.

Chapter Four

Jeremy stared into Cristían's eyes. Lupe lay between them, making a sound so much like a purr, it could be nothing else. His fingers were tangled in her hair as he cupped her head to his chest. God, Jeremy didn't want to let her go. His other hand rested on Cristían's knee. He didn't want to let Cristían go either, and Cristían didn't seem like he was in any hurry to leave.

They'd gone somewhere else besides orgasm heaven when they all climaxed. A place full of wonder and great knowledge. Some might call it the Akashic Field. Jeremy called it home. He'd reached out when a golden tendril had curled his way. But before he could link, it wrapped them all up in a shimmering bubble and gently returned them to the physical world. He'd never felt more loved or more disappointed.

"You saw it too." Cristían combed his fingers down Lupe's hair as he eased away. She arched her back into the caress and tried to cuddle deeper into Jeremy's arms.

"I did." Their gazes were still locked. Jeremy wondered if the mindspeak connection still worked when he wasn't in jaguar form.

Excitement sizzled through him. *A jaguar! Damn...it worked!* In ways Jeremy had never even imagined. Except joy didn't come with his success; only more confusion, another puzzle to solve. And a big secret that had to be covered up. Two big secrets. How were they going to explain Lupe?

"Did they give you anything?" Cristían asked.

Jeremy frowned. "They?"

Cristían pressed his lips together, as if afraid to speak. "Where we just were."

He shook his head. "Did they give *you* anything?"

That's when Cristían broke their gaze. "Yes." He sighed. "Too much. And then they took most of it away. I apparently get the information now when I guess they feel I can handle it." He snorted. "Then it's up to me to sort out what it means."

Jeremy started to sit up but hated to disturb Lupe's catnap, so he stayed where he was. "What kind of information?" He already knew the answer, no matter how improbable it sounded.

"Everything." Cristian's voice came out the barest of whispers. "It feels like everything."

"I don't know whether to be jealous or relieved."

Cristian's small laugh held no humor. "Be relieved. What I've got now is all jumbled and hard to sort out. Images and flashes of insight that fog over as quickly as I see them. And..." He scratched the hint of whiskers on his throat and looked everywhere but at Jeremy.

"You and Lupe aren't the only ones who've changed," he finally admitted. "I'm stronger, faster, and—" He waved his hand, and Jeremy felt a ripple of power course through him at the same time he heard the broken glass skitter farther away from them.

"Don't do that," Lupe mumbled. "It hurts inside me."

"Sorry, little one." Cristian braced himself over them, peeled her hair away from her face, and kissed the slope of her shoulder.

She smiled and wiggled into Jeremy once more.

"Good God, what did I do?" He tightened a hug around her, burrowing his face in her long hair.

Cristian nudged his arm. "This isn't all on you. I was running an experiment as well."

He pulled his head up, frowning. "You think the combination—"

Cristian shrugged, then shook his head. "I don't know what to think. Let's get cleaned up a little, and then we'll talk about it. Someone should be here any minute to check on us. We need to get ready for that." At which point, all hell would probably break loose. "We can wash off in the emergency shower. We don't want to risk—"

Lupe jerked up, smacking her head on Cristian's chin.

"No! No water!" She twisted between them, fighting for freedom.

Jeremy braced himself, waiting for her claws to come out. Cristian might be immune to damage, but he sure as hell wasn't. When she didn't shift, he realized she either couldn't or didn't know how.

"Calm down." Cristian pressed a firm hand against her shoulder.

Jeremy wrapped his arms around her to keep her still. “We have to wash off, Lupe. We don't want to risk contaminating anyone else.”

“I don't care about anyone else. I only care about me.” Spoken like the Lupe they both knew and loved.

Cristian patted her shoulder and looked like he fought back laughter. “I'll wet some paper towels and clean you that way. Just like always.”

Her tension eased, but suspicion still narrowed her green eyes. She peeled away from Jeremy when Cristian moved away. Cum blanketed her torso and Jeremy's. She glanced down, then tried to bend over, her tongue darting out to lick it away from her skin.

Confusion pulled her upright. “I can't reach. How can I clean myself? Oh...dear.” She twitched her nose.

Jeremy prayed Cristian didn't set her off again with more talk about showers. All he said in response was, “Indeed.”

She glared at him, then snorted when Cristian tapped her nose. Lupe batted at his hand. Laughing lightly, he dodged the blow and stretched to his feet, pulling up his jeans and briefs as he turned to leave.

Holy shit! “Stop!” Shards of glass protruded from Cristian's back.

“Wha—”

“Don't move.” Jeremy eased Lupe to the floor and jumped to his feet. “You have glass spikes in your back. Deep.”

Cristian craned his neck for a look.

“Easy!” He stilled Cristian with a hand on his hip and looked around. The lab was in shambles. Where the hell were those forceps? He picked his way over to the general area where his setup used to be and found the stainless-steel drawers dented but still intact.

He wrapped his hand around the handle and yanked. The drawer burst open, scattering the contents onto the floor.

Jeremy retrieved the forceps and returned to Cristian, wondering where the hell he should start first. “Be still. This might...” What? Hurt? Cristian seemed impervious to pain at the moment. He hadn't so much as blinked when Lupe whacked her head against his chin. “This

might be tricky.” He clamped the forceps onto a two-inch-wide shard. “You know, it's not such a good thing to not feel pain. You could be seriously hurt and not know it.”

“I know,” Cristian quietly replied. “One thing at a time.” He heaved a big sigh. “Just get them out.”

Jeremy's hand trembled. Sweat trickled down his back. He dared a glance in Lupe's direction. She hugged her knees to her chest, giving them a great shot of her crotch as she watched them. He half expected a tail to be wrapped around her, tip flicking with interest. At the thought, he felt his spine shift and lengthen into a thick jaguar tail.

Focus, damn it. He left the new appendage where it was for now and honed all his attention on Cristian. Breath held, he pulled the glass straight out. And pulled. And pulled. Until a bloodied six-inch shard came out. *Holy shit.*

“You okay?” he asked.

Cristian turned his head. “Yeah. Why?”

Jeremy held up the glass. “Because your heart was next to the other end of this.”

Cristian's eyes widened when he saw the glass; then he looked away, fingers curling into fists at his sides. Lupe gasped and surged to her feet. Jeremy expected a pool of blood to well up now that the glass had been removed. But nothing happened. He placed the glass shard on the counter and moved on to the next one.

Images of mystical thorns from a ceiba tree nurtured in a darkened cenote slammed into his head. Of how there seemed to be no end to splinters when pulled from a person. Of roots sprouting from those thorns, slithering deep into blood veins, until the person was reborn as a host body for a skinwalker. The comparison to their present condition hit a little too close to those images. They had all been reborn, but for the better or for the worse?

Jeremy was down to the last shard. None were as lethal-looking as that first one. There were even slivers dangling from Cristian's T-shirt. He clamped onto the final projectile and pulled. It snapped under the force.

“Shit!”

“It's okay,” Cristian said. “We'll dig it out later.” He grabbed the hem of his T-shirt and pulled up.

Jeremy backed up so fast, his ass slammed the drawer shut. Where he expected to see blood dripping down Cristian's back when he removed his shirt, there was...nothing. No hint of injury, not even a scar. His back was as perfect as it had always been, even more so.

"There's nothing there." The words came from Lupe. She stood beside them, her head canted to one side, while she studied Cristian's back. Then she reached for him.

Cristian sucked in a breath at the touch. Jeremy felt the caress too, as if she were doing it to him—down his backbone, over every muscle. His cock awakened, lifting its swollen head. He stared down and watched his prehensile jaguar tail flick around it. The sensation weakened his knees. He locked them in place and felt his vision blacken.

"What's this?"

Lupe's question pulled him back from the brink. Braced against the counter, Jeremy let his tail have its way with his cock and stared at what looked like a cyst growing on Cristian's back. Jeremy grabbed her hand before Lupe could poke at the lump again.

"What is it?" Cristian tried to look over his shoulder.

Before Jeremy could answer, the lump spit out the embedded glass, and then the wound disappeared, as if it had never existed. "Your body pushed out the glass. There's no wound." He swallowed hard. "In fact, there's not a scar on you, old or new."

"And what about the two of you?" Cristian faced them and scanned Jeremy.

Jeremy looked himself over too. Evidence of his impetuous and misspent youth glared back at him. He didn't want to waste valuable time cataloging the various scars. "Same scars as always. A couple of cuts and a few bruises, but those look like they're healing fast." He knew that was a result of the shift. "The tail is new, though."

Cristian grinned. "So I see."

"I was thinking about Lupe's tail, and this happened."

"Focus inward. You'll get the hang of it."

Jeremy closed his eyes and took command. The tail retreated. His erection remained. "And what about *this*?" He pointed to his penis.

Cristian snickered. "Come on, Jer. When have you ever been able to control *that*? We're men. Doesn't matter whether we're human or shifter, it's as unpredictable as always. Suck it up."

Lupe hugged Jeremy's side. "Do you need another blowjob?"

How had she managed to purr out the words? Jeremy's brain shut down.

Cristían eased her away. "Let's have a look at you first. I want to make sure you're not hurt."

"I'm going to the shower," Jeremy said. Maybe the cold water would shock his system back to normal. Failing that, he could always beat off. He stuffed his feet into his shoes and hurried off, his cock bobbing with every step.

It was a short walk. The explosion had pushed them more toward the wall than the stairs. That might make rescue a little tricky, since debris cluttered the way. What the hell...with Cristían's new abilities, he could clear a path with the wave of his arm. There were other exits from the basement too. The previous owners had built the place to make certain they could get out safely and undetected.

Jeremy shoved off his shoes and stepped into the open stall. It was designed for emergencies not comfort. The quicker a person could get in—clothes and all—the better. Jeremy stepped under the head and twisted on the cold water. It took his breath away, but not any more so than the sight of Cristían with Lupe. The shower was no more than twenty feet away, and he could see them clearly from his position.

Lupe topped out, he'd guess, at five feet, and that was being generous. Next to Cristían's muscular build, she looked like a fairy princess gone punk rock with her riot of hair colors. Her trim and petite build hid the body of a fighter. Muscles flexed with her every move, then disappeared under the facade. Her skin was smooth and unblemished, except for a smattering of small brown dots over her left side. The formation against her ribs was no larger than the width of his hand and would have looked like a birthmark on a human.

She is human, idiot.

Jeremy didn't need his conscience reminding him of that. He had eyes...and a cock that wanted back inside her tight pussy right now. Her muscles had clenched around him like she never wanted to let go.

He watched Cristían's hands mold over her. Calming her? Memorizing her new form for himself? Whichever it was, they looked beautiful together, sensuous. Lupe stretched into the touch, her eyes half-slitted. Jeremy knew that look so well. Contentment. He'd seen it thousands

of times before on her, like when she curled between their legs or snuggled beside them. Or when she watched them from her perch in whatever piece of furniture had become her throne. When she warmed herself in a sunny window, monitoring the wildlife for possible kitty snacks.

But this? Beauty in its purest form. Judging from the ridge swelling Cristian's jeans, Jeremy knew he appreciated that too.

He saw Cristian grasp her fingers and tug Lupe forward, urging her to follow him. Wild eyes glanced back toward the shower, and she balked. He brushed his fingers down her hair, over her cheek, and down her shoulder. Her nipples pebbled, and she arched her neck for attention. Cristian nuzzled behind her ear, then worked his lips down the tendon.

Her lips parted on a gasp. She curled her arm up and around, fingers digging into his thick brown hair. Cristian cupped her crotch, parting her glistening folds with his forefinger. Jeremy's mouth watered for a taste. She writhed into Cristian's hand, lost in the joy of sex. Jeremy wrapped his fist around his erection and stroked in time with Cristian's movements.

Jeremy's balls clenched, despite the fact he'd already come twice in the last... How long had they been here? He and Cristian had started work before dawn, and it felt like Barry wasn't here long after that. Help should be here soon. They couldn't be found like this, fucking like sailors on shore leave. Hell, maybe they shouldn't be found at all. How would they explain his nudity or the fact that Cristian didn't have a mark on him? And what about Lupe? His erection softened. Then Lupe came, and all the blood rushed back in, swelling him to the breaking point.

Cristian lifted her into his arms when she sagged and carried her toward the sink. Once there, he placed her gently on her feet.

Ah. Now he understood. Cristian was trying to make Lupe more amenable to a bath. He saw Cristian wet Jeremy's ruined shirt and use it to wipe the semen from her torso. She pressed her breasts up for attention. Cristian paused, then slid the cotton over her nipples. They puckered. Cristian pressed his lips together. His erection had yet to subside, and Jeremy couldn't resist a silent chuckle. Their cocks really were the bosses of them.

Jeremy gripped his dick with an iron fist and beat it hard. Cristian looked his way, and Jeremy saw his nostrils flare. Then he turned that hungry look back at Lupe. Cristian tossed the shirt to the counter and released the beast in his jeans. One arm swept Lupe to him. Cradling her ass, Cristian impaled her.

Lupe's cry overrode the sound of the shower. She clutched her arms and legs around Cristian, taking every pounding thrust he slammed into her. Jeremy jerked off with the same intensity, mirroring Cristian's actions, remembering how damn tight she felt. His body merged with the jungle cat inside him. His escalating body heat turned the cold shower into steam. He was going to come. They all were. Together.

As it should be.

Jeremy braced his palm against the narrow stall and let go. Finally his balls loosened, and his penis subsided to a manageable level.

But he was far from sated. If he lived a thousand years, he knew he'd never get enough of them.

Chapter Five

Cristian dried off with a handful of paper towels. He'd used the shower after Jeremy as a precaution only, followed by rote to waylay physical damage in a lab accident or to prevent contaminating others. He knew it didn't matter. What had happened to them was inside them, part of their DNA, not on the outside, like a chemical spill or burn on their skin. After all, it was DNA experiments he and Jeremy had been working on. It'd take thorough analysis of all the data they'd accumulated to determine how those experiments had combined and mutated. He shuddered. All he wanted to do was destroy it all. Considering what lingered in his mind from the metaphysical download he'd been subjected to, that was probably for the best.

Then his analytical side intervened. That perhaps he'd been given the information to make a difference, to change events. That once he'd been told, that action had already changed the course of things to come, and that was why the connection had been severed and the bulk of the knowledge removed—because it was no longer relevant. Cristian's head ached from trying to sort through the jumble of information in his mind.

So much for not feeling pain.

Cristian winced and rubbed circles against his temples to alleviate the pain.

He needed to talk this out with Jeremy, but not here. Somehow they had to find a safe house. A place outside the realm of the jaguar and mountain lion clans. Safety protocols, however, made that impossible. Members of the dwindling jaguar clan possessed a microchip to track their location, to render aid, or retrieve their remains. His people could find him anywhere. Hacking the system to try to disarm it was possible—after all, Jeremy helped design it—but with everyone linked in, it might take days to integrate a surreptitious removal.

He looked around the blown-up lab. Some portions looked like they might be salvageable once the debris was cleared away.

By his estimation, they only had a few minutes left before the safety barricades were disengaged and someone came down to rescue them. Actually he was surprised Barry hadn't tried to call his cell to see if they were all right. That left him with the slim hope that Barry and Frieda hadn't heard the blast; or if they did, they'd passed off the shaking as a minor earthquake.

That suited Cristian just fine. He would rather Barry find out about this on Cristian's schedule, not his own. He didn't want Frieda to know at all, though by the treaty that existed between them, the mountain lion clan would eventually need to be told something.

He wondered how successful he, Jeremy, and Lupe would be at sneaking out one of the escape tunnels. They could grab what was left of the laptops and get the hell out of there. Find a place to hole up while they figured things out. Cristian tapped his lip, deep in thought. Maybe get to Wyatt. He was much more reasonable than Barry, as a leader should be. Plus he was somewhat distracted by the upcoming birth of his children. They might be able to use that to their advantage.

The tracking chip would tell on them, though. Not to mention the plethora of surveillance cameras all around this estate. The previous owners had made the place a fortress. Right now it felt like a prison. If they cut the power to the camera, a backup generator kicked in without so much as a bleep. When that happened, the computers at Braden Science Institute would also be signaled.

Jeremy could pass. No one needed to know that his experiment had succeeded, that he'd been transformed into a jaguar. Lupe... He sighed. No. There was no explaining her presence. He'd tried working with her while Jeremy showered. She either didn't have the ability to shift back to cat, or she didn't understand the concept of how to do so. In any event, she was here to stay. And, he admitted, he didn't want it any other way. The thought of changing her back twisted his gut. His feelings had nothing to do with Rose. Though Rose's DNA might have helped give Lupe her new form, it was Lupe who spawned the feelings he currently possessed. Duty, responsibility, obligation, protection, all crept into his mind. Yes, he owed her all those things, but they were nothing compared to the oneness his soul felt now that she was in human form and he could truly be with her. *With them.*

He watched Jeremy help her dress in one of the extra lab coats they'd found to wear. It engulfed her but was certainly better than having her naked, although that was indeed a beautiful

sight. After Jeremy helped her roll up the sleeves, she mastered the intricacies of the buttons with one try. He supposed she'd learned a lot over the years from watching humans. She had so much more to learn, though, personal care being at the top of the list.

She smiled up at Jeremy with the same adoration she'd given him. Lupe had been their devoted companion for six months. Unconditional love had poured their way 24-7. How could they not return that love? And now, seeing her standing next to Jeremy's tall, lean body, remembering how it felt when *he* stood beside her... It was the ultimate culmination of everything they'd been to each other. A blessing bestowed upon them. His best friends, now his mates. Cristían would fight hell and damnation to keep from losing this blessing, from losing them.

The metallic *thunk* of the barricades releasing jolted through them. Cristían hauled on his jeans and slid his feet into his shoes. Jeremy stood between Lupe and the stairs. With his new enhanced powers/sensations, Cristían could hear their hearts beat in tandem, racing with trepidation.

"We need to find our laptops and wipe them."

Jeremy whipped around. "Are you crazy? The data on them—"

"Has to be destroyed. If it got into the wrong hands—"

"Then we need to be able to defend against it, and the only way is to have the original research."

Jeremy was right. And so continued the conundrum Cristían faced. "Did you ever link with the main system?"

Jeremy shook his head. "Only to run unrelated theoretical analyses on random segments. If I was wrong, I didn't want to be embarrassed and have it rubbed in my face. Or have my access revoked."

Which Barry would have no problem doing.

"If I was right, I wanted to approach Wyatt first," Jeremy said. "Barry had enough issues when he thought we were—as he put it—'wasting fucking time and resources.' I can't begin to imagine what he'd do if he found out we were successful."

Neither could Cristían. Barry had always been a control freak, which had been to the clan's benefit during their trying times. But Rose's death had broken them all. Sweet Rose, who loved

everyone without reservation, one of the last two females of their line. Had she known she carried life within her when she was killed? With her death, any hope for the continuation of their people had faded. Only when Carmen delivered healthy daughters to Joaquin had that hope been renewed. Then Wyatt found Trina, and now more children were on the way.

Barry had seen none of the joy, though. He only saw enemies in everything and everyone outside the clan. Hell, he barely trusted Jeremy. Exercising caution was a good idea—Cristian didn't trust the mountain lion clan as far as he could throw them—but not to the level of paranoia Barry exhibited. But his paranoia might have worked to their benefit today. Barry knew what they were working on. Once he realized there'd been an incident—if he'd still been on the premises—he might have encouraged Frieda to leave for her own safety. That, at least, would be one big problem resolved for the moment. Cristian would tackle the other problems as they came.

Right now would be a good time for a little universal enlightenment.

He got nothing.

“I think it would be wise to keep our new abilities to ourselves.” He waved his arm, moving debris aside as he searched for their laptops. “There's nothing we can do to hide the fact Lupe exists.”

“What if I can't control my shifting?”

Cristian felt the panic in Jeremy as much as he heard it in his voice. He hurried over to his friend, cupped his head between his hands, and touched his forehead to his. “You are one of the strongest-willed men I know. You can do it.” He willed Jeremy to believe that.

Jeremy nodded on a slowly released breath. “I'll throw my clothes in the shower and soak them. We'll tell Barry the experiment splattered me, and we ripped them off while I was under the shower...as a precaution.”

“Good.” He squeezed Jeremy's shoulder and started to move away. Lupe's hovering presence stopped him. He lifted his arm and drew her against them in a group hug. Fear poured off all of them. It bonded them as much as the sex had, maybe more.

One. They were one now. He'd fight to his last breath to keep it that way.

“You understand what's going on?” he asked her. “That we need to keep it a secret that Jeremy and I have changed?”

“Yes. I understand.” She burrowed closer. “I’ve always been good at keeping secrets. I’m a good listener.”

Jeremy chuckled. “You sure are. The best confidant I’ve ever had.”

Cristían wouldn’t argue that. He’d poured his heart out to her since she’d come into his life. His salvation in the face of overwhelming grief.

Jeremy squeezed another hug around them and pulled back. “Let’s find those laptops. I’m not leaving them behind. In the wrong hands, the information on them would be disastrous.”

A sickening sense of déjà vu rolled over Cristían. Well, he had asked for universal enlightenment. Now if he could only figure out what to do with it. He’d figure that out once he determined what everything meant.

Chapter Six

Did she understand? The words hurt. Of course Lupe understood. What did they think the last six months had been about? She'd been with them daily, listening, watching, cuddling. She reminded them when to eat, when to sleep, when to take a break. She'd been there when they were sad, offering comfort. Been there for the brief spates of joy, when an idea clicked for them and then worked. Watched Jeremy stroke himself day and night. Put up with that horrible woman in Cristian's bed. They were the ones who didn't understand. She *loved* them. Loved them so much, she'd wished their form upon herself. Now here she was, human. She could hardly believe it herself. All those years of studying the human race were going to finally pay off.

Lupe rubbed her hand down her arm. Her new body felt different than she'd expected. Awkward and confusing one minute, exciting and joyful the next, and especially wondrous when they were mating. The experience was nothing like it had been when she was a cat. She wanted to do it over and over again.

She flexed her fingers, mesmerized by the way they curled closed, then stretched open. The nails were shorter than she'd imagined they'd be. Her teeth were blunt. Being without defenses didn't sit well. As she recalled from her years of observation, the nails would grow, but she was stuck with the teeth. She was going to miss those sharp points. They were great for ripping into fresh meat—although she wouldn't be doing that anymore either. Human used knives and forks, a skill she still had to acquire.

The sensations running through this new body confused her as well, and she'd be the first to admit that fear and panic overrode her common sense. Who knew tears could set her off like that? She knew what tears were. She'd seen the children, women, and men she'd lived with over the years shed them regularly. It was the gut-clenching emotion that went with the tears that threw her off. But with each second she spent as a human, she understood the new sensations

more, and they really weren't much different than what she already knew. Joy, pleasure, hunger, thirst, cold, and having to use the litter box.

No, the toilet. That meant trying out more of the skills she'd memorized from six years of observation.

"I need to go to the bathroom," she told them.

Jeremy's head jerked up from his search. "You know how?"

She sniffed. "Of course. I'm very observant." She just needed practice.

Without another word, she picked her way toward the bathroom in the adjacent computer room, watchful for any glass Cristian might have missed with his sweep. The last thing she wanted to deal with was glass in her paws—feet. But he'd done a superb job, and once she stepped into the other room, there was no sign there'd been an explosion. She supposed that was one of the reasons the areas were kept separate.

Lupe picked up in her pace. She really had to go and didn't want to have an accident. How embarrassing that would be. She'd mapped every crack and crevice of the place, always one of her first priorities when she found herself in a new location. The knowledge served her well, as her feet went on autopilot while she mulled over a few things. Her greatest wish had come true. Yes, the challenges were great, but she wasn't about to give up. She had her men, and she wasn't letting them go.

Now...how to defeat Frieda. Because the woman had to go. She might smile and thrash about in bed with him, but the minute Cristian's back was turned, Frieda always lashed out at Lupe.

Lupe grinned. That might have had something to do with the fact that Lupe always growled and hissed at Frieda, and perhaps the occasional claw swipe didn't help matters either. Then there was that sweet moment when Lupe had bitten the woman's ass.

If Frieda had been pure of heart and had some affection for Cristian, Lupe might have overlooked her intrusion into their lives and eventually put up with her. The woman had neither. She was using Cristian for her own gain, whatever that was. Which Lupe supposed was fitting, since Cristian was doing the same thing to Frieda.

A shudder wiggled down her back. Lupe would have destroyed all his work before letting him put Rose's life force into Frieda's body. He could do much better than her. He could use her. She'd do anything for him.

Lupe finally arrived at her destination and stepped into the small bathroom, shutting the door behind her. Another pleasure of being human—privacy to relieve one's self. Lupe wasted no time doing just that, proud she'd negotiated the intricacies involved with that little problem. Watching clearly paid off. With a little practical application, she'd be top cat. Or was that top human? She shrugged and stared at herself in the mirror above the sink. She'd always loved watching herself in the mirror, trying out her moves and expressions.

"I'm...pretty." She combed her fingers down her long hair. It was perfect too! All the colors just like she'd had before, though a little more white would be nice. Like her friend Trina. Now there was a beautiful woman!

Lupe jumped onto the narrow counter around the sink. Her reflexes were still sharp as ever, another plus.

Standing, she unbuttoned the lab coat for a better look at her new body. Her light brown nipples wrinkled with the brush of cool air that passed over them. Who knew it would feel so good to have them touched?

She let the coat drop and cupped one hand to her breast; the other she used to part her lower folds. The little nub between them wasn't as swollen as before and barely peeked out. One touch of her finger changed that.

Lupe gasped and rolled her finger over it again. She'd seen women do this before and never understood. Now she did...and wanted it! She tweaked her nipple and pressed the pads of her fingers over her—what was it called?—clitoris. Her foot hit something in her excitement, and water gushed into the sink.

She leaped off the sink and shrank against the wall, her heart hammering against her ribs. *Trapped!* She had to get past the monster to get to the door. It didn't bother her when the water was swirling down the toilet, but this moved fast.

Lupe willed herself to calm down. Humans used water constantly and didn't die. If she was going to live as one, she had to get over this fear. Her foot had touched the faucet and turned it

on. Nothing more. The water wasn't coming to get her. There was no deep, dark pool. No stench of rotted fish or wharf rats.

Lupe swallowed hard, still staring at the rushing water. She could do this. She had to.

Pulling in a shaky breath, she crept forward, her hand extended to shut the beast off. When she neared, Lupe dared a finger under the flow, then jerked back when it splashed her. She lived! In fact, it was no worse than rain. She tolerated rain—it was effective in keeping her clean.

“I will defeat you.” She batted at the stream, then again. Emboldened, she shoved her hand under it and grinned with her new success. Then she nudged the faucet to cut it off.

“Cristian and Jeremy will be so proud of me.” Lupe was proud of *herself*.

Head high, shoulders back, she slipped the lab coat back on, then left the bathroom and practiced her slinkiest cat walk. Some things came naturally, whether a cat or a human. She smiled at her prowess and checked out the surveillance TVs as she walked through the computer room. Television was one of her greatest pleasures. It gave her valuable insight into the species she studied, allowed her to see places she'd never imagined, and helped her realize not all humans were murderers. With these particular televisions, Lupe could monitor the world outside. What a pleasure to be able to see them at this level. She'd never have to crane her neck again to watch them.

A flash of movement caught the corner of her eye. She narrowed her vision, hoping to zero in on the finer details on that particular TV. Sorting through the colors in the foliage, Lupe picked out a discrepancy. Many discrepancies. She darted to another view of the exterior, then ran for her men.

“We're being surrounded.” She pointed toward the surveillance monitors. “Mountain lions are hiding in the bushes around the house.”

A simultaneous *fuck* burst from them. Cristian zipped past her. Jeremy wasn't far behind. Lupe brought up the rear. The call to action sent her blood surging. She was born to battle!

“There!” She pointed to the nearest TV.

Jeremy punched some keys, and the view closed in. “What the hell?”

“Barry's car is still here.” Cristian dashed from one console to the next. His speed gave Lupe another rush. “Frieda's car is gone.”

Jeremy moved with him, calling up one close-up after the other. "They're everywhere, Cristian! This is a planned attack!"

"And Barry's up there on his own. Can you tap into Braden's computers and track him with his microchip?"

Lupe watched Jeremy's fingers fly over the keyboard. She loved the music of those keys clicking, obeying Jeremy's every command.

"Best I can tell, he's still nearby," Jeremy said. "He could be hurt, trapped, or hiding."

"Or their hostage. That would explain why he didn't call my cell, why he wasn't in the basement the second the shields disengaged." The power in Cristian rippled her way. Lupe pulled it inside her, building her own reserves for the fight.

"I'll lock them down again."

Cristian grabbed Jeremy's arm before he could move to do so. "No, I can't leave Barry alone up there at their mercy. If he's hurt or unconscious, gods only know what they'll do to him. Damn it, I told Wyatt we needed cameras inside the house!"

Jeremy dropped his hand over Cristian's. The affection and respect in that touch spun Lupe's heart around.

"They could be up there waiting for you," he said.

"Then I guess we'd better hope I'm really as indestructible as it seems."

"Every Superman has his kryptonite. I'd prefer to not find out what yours is today."

"Me either." Cristian ran for the stairs. "Be prepared to lock it down at a moment's notice."

"I won't lock you out!" Jeremy shouted to Cristian's back.

"And I won't have the two of you taken. Be watchful." Cristian shoved his hand in his jeans pocket and pulled out his cell phone. "Call Wyatt. *Now*. If you can't reach him, call Joaquin. We need an extraction team."

Lupe caught the phone in one hand, then tossed it over to Jeremy. They made a fine team. The steel door closed behind Cristian.

"Let the predator become the prey." She locked her attention on the TVs. "I'm ready to stand and fight, Jeremy."

"Never a second's doubt, little warrior."

Tones beeped as Jeremy dialed. She'd memorized the melody long ago as Wyatt's number. Her attention never wavered. It felt good to be alive! Good to be making a stand with her men!

Wyatt answered quickly.

"We're trapped at the Prentice estate," she heard Jeremy tell him. "Barry might be down. Cristian's gone to retrieve him. They've surrounded us." He paused, then said, "The other clan." Another pause as he glanced Lupe's way. "Extraction is going to be...tricky."

"Why?" She heard Wyatt's voice, loud and clear.

Before Jeremy could respond, the steel door opened. She and Jeremy took defensive postures in the event they'd been breached. Then the door closed, and Cristian ran down the stairs with a bloodied Barry draped over his shoulder.

"Lock it down!" he ordered.

Jeremy already had his hand over the button. He smacked it hard, and the shields slipped into place.

"We've got Barry and are locked in," he told Wyatt. "He's hurt."

Blood covered Barry's face, trickled down his neck, and glistened on his black shirt. Barry's palms were bloodied too, probably from touching his wound—wherever it was. There was so much blood, Lupe couldn't see it.

Cristian placed him gently on the floor. She ran to the sink and wet as many paper towels as she could stuff in her hands. Cristian's gaze widened when she knelt next to the wounded man.

"I'm no longer afraid of water," she explained and reached to clean Barry.

"Good to know," Cristian muttered, then took a portion of the towels to help the man.

Barry's eyes fluttered open.

"He's coming around," Jeremy told Wyatt.

Barry groaned, then squinted up at Cristian. "She coldcocked me when I left the basement. *Bitch.*"

"It was a planned action." Cristian blotted the damp towel over Barry's face. "We're surrounded. Jeremy's on the phone with Wyatt now."

"My phone." Barry patted his pockets and struggled to sit. "I had it in my hand when she hit me. If she took it—"

Cristian pressed his shoulder back to the floor. "Relax. We'll find it later."

Barry sighed, blinked again, and rolled his gaze Lupe's way. Confusion scrunched up his face. "What the... Lupe?"

"What's Lupe doing in the lab?" she heard Wyatt ask over the phone.

"Looks like first aid to me," Jeremy replied. "See you soon." He ended the call with one punch.

"What the hell have you two done?" Barry groaned and clutched his head.

"Here, let me clean that." Lupe pulled his hand away. "I'm not afraid of water now."

"O...kay." Somehow he managed a smirk. "Puss."

Lupe flicked her thumb against his nose. "Don't call me that. I hate it."

"It *is* Lupe." His gaze widened with the words, like he truly couldn't believe it. Then his dark eyes shadowed, a look Lupe was afraid to decipher.

"How..." Barry clamped his lips into a thin line and muffled a groan.

"Let's get you taken care of first." Cristian parted Barry's hair. "You've got quite a gash there. Good thing your head's so hard."

"Very funny." He didn't sound amused.

Human sarcasm always mystified Lupe. She didn't really understand it. She wiped at Barry's neck, dislodging a silver button from the back of his collar. It clattered to the floor, drawing everyone's attention.

None of the men moved. Barry's eyes bulged out even more than they normally did. She drew breath to ask what was wrong. Cristian snapped his palm up to silence her before the words came out, then crushed the silver dot under his heel. Jeremy scooped it up and carried it away. The next sound she heard was the *whoosh* of the toilet flushing.

"I'll call Wyatt and let him know you were bugged," Jeremy said when he returned.

"Bugged?" She screwed her face up. That looked like no bug she'd ever seen. It didn't have legs or a body—it wasn't even *a bug*, just some shiny piece. And why would someone want to put a bug on Barry's neck? Granted, she didn't like him, but bugs were for eating not wearing.

"A listening device, so they could spy on us here," Jeremy said as he punched in Wyatt's number.

Ah...now she knew what detectives and spies meant.

“Well”—Cristían dabbed at Barry's head wound once more—“now we know why Frieda was all over you.”

Barry draped his forearm over his eyes. “And here I thought it was my charming personality.”

“But...you don't have one,” Lupe said.

“I know,” he replied. “And my self-respect is pretty much shot to hell too. But thanks for pointing it out...puss.”

Lupe grabbed his nipple through his silky black shirt and pinched as hard as she could. Barry squealed and tried to crawl away. Lupe held fast, and Cristían was smart enough to put a little distance between himself and them.

She shoved her face next to Barry's ear. “You don't know how sorry I am I no longer have claws. You might not have any self-respect left, but you will damn well start showing some respect for others. Especially *me*.” She gave his nipple a harder pinch, then let go and slapped the soggy paper towels in his face. “Tend yourself.” She pushed herself to her feet and strode toward the bathroom to clean the stench of his blood from her.

Chapter Seven

The birth of a queen.

Cristian couldn't compare Lupe's metamorphosis to anything else. Each minute, more of the self-confident woman emerged and the wide-eyed innocent faded. She stalked along the bank of surveillance equipment, monitoring every breath the mountain lions took. Her short legs ate up the distance in long strides that made her appear a foot taller. The pheromones before were nothing compared to this. Sex mingled with raw power. She was a jungle goddess on the hunt, ready to take down anyone who dared threaten her domain.

She was...irresistible.

Jeremy paced the line of televisions as well, his cock tenting his lab coat. Cristian had adjusted his erection three times when the press of denim threatened to break it in two. Even Barry, hurt as he was, had a hard-on ridging his pant leg.

"Any idea what she hit you with?" The head wound was long and looked deep. Profuse bleeding had finally slowed to a seep. Their people healed quickly, but life-threatening injuries were still life threatening.

"Not a clue. It happened so fast. She was a flash in my peripheral vision when I topped the stairs." Barry winced and tried to sit. He wavered and lay back down. "Butt of a gun?"

Cristian folded up a lab coat, lifted Barry's head, and slid it under as a cushion. "If she'd had a gun, she would have shot you."

"And risk you hearing it?"

"How could we hear anything down here? With a gun, there's little risk. If we ran up to investigate, she would have taken us out one by one." At which point her team would have taken over the lab and retrieved all the research. He stole a quick glance at the monitors. The mountain lions had amassed enough manpower to mount an infiltration.

"I have a feeling she used a weapon of opportunity," Cristian said. "Something she grabbed in the heat of the moment after she heard our conversation over her little bug. Alone and unarmed, she wouldn't have come into the basement."

"She couldn't get in the basement. The cipher lock is changed every other day. They don't know that." Barry clutched his stomach. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Cristian jumped up for the biohazard trash can. He found it dented and empty, its contents strewn among the other debris from the explosion. He shoved it toward Barry in the nick of time.

"You've probably got a concussion." He handed him a fresh paper towel to wipe his mouth. "At least you're still alive to complain about it."

"Not for long, considering they've got us surrounded and outnumbered."

It wasn't like Barry to be defeatist, even if the odds weren't in their favor. They never had been. The mountain lion clan outmanned the jaguar clan by at least three to one. Money and resources, though, gave the jaguars the upper hand. Greed and power struggles had been feeding wars for millennia. Why would their circumstances be any exception?

Frieda and her people had seen a tactical advantage, hoping to find Cristian and Jeremy alone in the lab. The mountain lions had the annoying ability to disguise themselves at will, to assume whatever human form they wished. He'd be willing to bet they'd intended to take over the estate, kill him and Jeremy, and assume their identities. Two things stopped them: Frieda didn't have the code for the cipher lock and, therefore, couldn't get in to distract them and Barry's presence. That they'd apparently scrambled quickly to create an alternate plan meant they were damned organized.

"What the hell did you two do?" Barry groaned again and blotted the wet towel over his face.

"It was an accident." No lie there. "Jeremy's experiment got away from him." Cristian debated whether to search for the first aid kit or leave Barry as he was. As long as Barry's head remained supported on the lab coat, the wound was protected. There was little more Cristian could do. With luck, Barry's natural defenses would take over soon and jump-start the healing process.

Barry sighed. "Honestly I don't know what hurts most, my head or my cock. Pheromones are pouring off her."

“Let's cover your eyes. It might help with the dizziness and the headache.” He folded a compress over Barry's eyes. “There's nothing I can do for the other.”

“She reeks of sex too.”

“Just doing what comes naturally,” he replied.

“Not to Jeremy.”

Cristían was glad Barry's eyes were covered. “You know how it is. It's easy to get caught up in the rush. He just came along for the ride.”

“For someone who was a cat... How long has it been, anyway?” He shoved his elbows under himself, preparing to push himself up.

Cristían held him down with a firm hand to the chest. “We aren't sure and haven't checked yet.”

“Hmmm.” Barry settled down. “Well, she seems very accommodating.”

“If you're entertaining any notions of her accommodating you, forget it. You aren't one of Lupe's favorite people. She'd be more inclined to snap your dick off at the root and shove it down your throat.”

The promise didn't wilt Barry. If anything, it made him harder. Barry's preference might be male, but he appreciated a powerful woman.

“I'm claiming her as mine. I won't share her with you.” If Barry doubted the words, Cristían's tone backed them up.

Barry snatched the compress from his eyes. A glare made his gaze as hard as his cock. “But you'll share her with Jeremy?”

Cristían gave a single nod. “Yes. We are one.”

For the single beat of his heart, Cristían swore he saw sadness in Barry's eyes. He masked it by replacing the compress.

“I hope our people get here soon.”

“Rest.” Cristían cupped his shoulder. “I'll see if there's been any progress.” He snagged the bio can as he stood and tossed the spent towels into it.

Lupe and Jeremy now paced in opposite directions, their gazes never wandering from the surveillance cameras. They flanked Cristian when he joined them, and it was all he could do to keep his hands off them. The heat...the scent...the *want*... Nature's aphrodisiac.

"They haven't moved a blink." Lupe braced her fists on her hips, looking very much the warrior goddess.

"Did you determine how long it's been since the explosion?" he asked.

"You know how easily you and I lose track of time when we're working." Jeremy crossed his arms and stood with legs shoulder-width apart, erection jutting out—the god to match Lupe's goddess. "If our laptops weren't in pieces, we might have been able to determine time by how much battery power was left." He shrugged and slowly shook his head. "I can't begin to guess. If we're able to salvage the hard drives, we might have some estimate."

Cristian was hoping for total destruction. Whatever mystery they'd unleashed was best left hidden. But it didn't look like it was going to play out that way. He grabbed his cell phone from the desk where Jeremy had placed it. "It's ten thirty right now, still the same day. What time did you get here, Barry?"

He rubbed at his eyes. "Seven."

"And the explosion happened shortly thereafter. Was Frieda here when you arrived, or did she show up afterward?"

Barry shook his head. "I...can't remember. I walked in the front door, and then she was there behind me."

Cristian nodded. It was just as he'd thought—a planned action. Why else would she be at the estate so early in the morning? To spy or attack? The lapse in time from explosion to now would have given her ample time to rouse her people. The bug she'd planted on Barry would have given her the ammo to do so.

"Do you think she and her people were responsible for the explosion?" Barry asked.

Cristian wished it were as simple as that. "I don't know. Let's hope this is resolved without any more blood being spilled. Wyatt and Joaquin are here." They watched as a gray hybrid SUV pulled into the drive, and Joaquin's red crew-cab truck was right behind, followed by a dusty green Jeep Cherokee that had seen better days.

"What the fuck is *he* doing here?" Jeremy said and started another lethal pace.

Cristían knew it was the jaguar in Jeremy sensing the fight. Waves of anxiety drifted from Lupe as well. Her tension pulled Cristían's nerves taut too.

"Who is it?" Barry grunted as he struggled to his feet.

"Steven Bernard is behind them." The de facto leader of the mountain lion clan. A thankless job, as far as Cristían was concerned. Had they met under different circumstances, Cristían and Steven might have been good friends. He genuinely liked the man, liked the fact that he was serious about uniting their clans and finding ways for them to coexist. There were times in the beginning of their clans' association that Cristían considered extending his hand in friendship. Life and grief had swept his intent away. Now, seeing Steven trailing Wyatt and Joaquin up that long drive, Cristían was glad he hadn't.

Steven's presence raised alarms and the hairs on the back of Cristían's neck. On the surface, it looked like a complete coup—one team had taken control of the Prentice estate, while another moved in on the Braden Science Institute. He smacked his forehead. How could they have been so oblivious?

Cristían cautioned himself against premature conclusions. He'd been given insight; it might be nice if he tried to use it. Nicer still if he could remember it all.

The four of them silently watched as the vehicles wove up the ribbon of driveway. Cameras along the way showed Wyatt, Joaquin, and Steven in their own vehicles. From just a quick glance inside, Cristían saw others in the vehicles as well. Jaguar clans with their own, mountain lions with their own; nothing to suggest force. Tension still coiled in his belly and settled in his loins. He ached from the wait. Testosterone pumped through his veins with a life of its own. Cristían couldn't help it. His hand moved of its own volition, idly stroking his cock. He didn't give a damn who saw. He might not be *the* alpha, but he was a leader of men, and he had a right to prepare for battle as he chose. Who knew when he'd live to fight another day? Pleasure was a gift from the gods, meant to honor. In doing so, they might grant their warriors favor in what was to come.

The thought stopped him cold. How easy it was to fall back on old beliefs. The truth hovered over Cristían's head in that spinning ball of gold. He just didn't know what to do with it. Or how to access it when needed.

He hooked his thumb through his jean belt loops. The vehicles pulled to a stop in the apron of driveway in front of the sprawling mansion—itsself an homage to old beliefs. The men piled out of the vehicles. Steven's blond head, and those of the two men with him, stood out in the sea of dark brown. No weapons were in sight.

Wyatt and Steven briefly exchanged words, then strode toward the right side of the house. Joaquin was never far from Wyatt's side. He wouldn't be unarmed, no matter what Wyatt ordered. Joaquin always had at least a knife on him.

"They are mad, but not at each other," Lupe said. She'd spent her whole life watching the behavior of others. Cristian knew that her instincts would be honed to a very fine edge. Her survival depended on accuracy. "I see worry, confusion, fear, distrust."

"Excellent assessment, little warrior," Cristian told her.

He watched her chin lift a notch, but her gaze remained on the monitors.

They tracked the party's progress from camera to camera. Held their breath when Steven and his two men strode away and to one line of bushes. Wyatt and Joaquin stayed near the house, their backs to the camera. The other jaguar men fanned out but didn't go far.

Halfway across the yard, Steven stopped. The lift of his broad shoulders indicated he'd called out. The response was instant—two mountain lion men charged forward, semiautomatic weapons clutched in their hands. Steven's back muscles bunched beneath his tan cotton shirt. The message was clear.

"He fears they'll kill him." Lupe's observation was on the mark.

The jaguar clan was right in the line of fire behind Steven; all their backs were against the wall. Cristian prayed they hadn't run into a trap. Wyatt was usually more cautious.

"If they open fire, you three get to Joaquin's truck and get the hell out of here. He always leaves the keys in the ignition, just in case."

"What about our men?" Barry demanded to know.

"Those are semiautomatic weapons." Cristian jerked his finger toward the monitor. "They're surrounded, with nowhere to run. They're as good as dead."

"And where do you expect to be, while we're running for our lives?" Barry yelled, then clutched his head and staggered.

Jeremy braced Barry and cast Cristian a sidelong glance that clearly asked the same question.

“There's Frieda!” Lupe pointed at the monitor.

The woman stormed from cover toward the men. Those with weapons gave her wide berth and clear access to Steven. Flailing her arms, she hurled words at her clansman. Steven's stance remained rigid. This was why Cristian had liked the man so well—his grace under pressure, his grace...period. But even the best of men had their tipping point, and it looked like Steven had finally reached his.

Steven waited until Frieda finished her tirade, then executed a crisp turn and strode toward Wyatt and Joaquin. Frieda ran to keep up with him, nearly colliding into his back when he stopped.

More words were exchanged. Demands and counters that ended with them staring at each other. If they'd been in cat form, Cristian knew they'd be circling for attack. Both sides squared their shoulders on a sharp intake of breath. Cristian could almost feel their nostrils flaring. He clenched his fists. Sharp claw points poked his palms. A deep-throated rumble from Jeremy alerted him Jeremy's control was slipping.

“I need to focus inward,” he said aloud, knowing Jeremy would understand without Barry realizing there was yet another new shifter in their midst.

Steven waved his arm through the air. The word he shouted to his people was clear, even to those watching the camera feeds: *leave!*

Again the bushes rustled as the mountain lions skulked away.

Wyatt shoved his hand in his pocket and drew out his cell phone. Cristian's own blurted awake in his hand. He answered before the first ring could die.

“Disengage the barriers. We're coming in.”

“That's not a good idea.” Cristian eyed Lupe and Jeremy.

“Refusal isn't an option.” Wyatt ended the call.

Cristian sighed. “Release the barriers.”

“But...”

He gave Jeremy a shrug.

Jeremy sighed. "All right."

The clamps released. Barry sank into a computer chair and buried his head in his bloodied hands. Cristian wrapped an arm around Lupe, holding her close, and prepared to defend her at all costs. Jeremy added his strength from the other side.

They watched the stairs. The locks *thunked* open. They held their collective breath when the steel door swung aside. Wyatt paused on the top step, then started down. Joaquin, Steven, and Frieda followed. Their gazes immediately fell to Lupe. Cristian's grip on her shoulders tightened.

Wyatt and Joaquin scanned the debris. Steven's gaze followed. Frieda's, though, never left Lupe. He'd never seen such hate in a person before.

Beside him, Lupe tensed. If Barry wasn't one of her favorite people, Frieda topped the list of those she despised. As a cat, Lupe had never lost the chance to swipe her claws at the woman. One memorable evening, he'd found Frieda rising to the bait. She'd shifted into her mountain lion form and faced off with a hissing Lupe. Lupe was winning when he broke them up.

"Barry needs a doctor," Cristian told them. He gestured at Frieda. "She whacked his skull in." It wasn't far from the truth.

"All's fair in love and war. He was so focused on his stupid cell phone, he never saw it coming." Frieda's feigned purr didn't work.

"You okay?" Wyatt asked Barry.

Barry waved off his concern and headed up the stairs. "I think I'm good enough to shift now. That ought to speed up the healing. Then I'll have the institute doctors check me out later."

"We'll meet you up there." Wyatt clapped his shoulder as he passed by, keeping everyone behind him until Barry was safely upstairs.

"See, Steven?" Frieda pushed her way past them. "I told you. They've created their own human from that stupid little cat."

Cristian commended Lupe for remaining in one place. Even he wanted to scratch Frieda's eyes out.

Frieda turned her glare on him. "How dare you think to use me as your...your...vessel! Is this your precious *Rose*?" She sneered at Lupe.

“No, this is all Lupe.”

She grinned. “Ah yes. Your breath reeks of tuna fish.”

Lupe flexed her shoulders. “So does your crotch.”

The claws came out.

Chapter Eight

Jeremy clamped his hand around Frieda's throat. The tips of his claws dug deep into her neck, drawing blood. It happened so fast, he couldn't have stopped himself, much less anticipated it. She'd hissed at Lupe and sprung her claws for attack. Lupe had snarled back, ready to battle, even without defenses of her own. Jeremy had reacted on instinct, defending his female mate.

Lupe stood behind him now, hand against his back, letting the battle play out. God, the things Lupe did to him! Her scent, her mere presence, her subtle quiver telling him she was ready to fight, called to both the beast and the man in him. He'd never be able to separate one from the other; he didn't want to. He felt like he'd finally become all he was meant to be, physically and intellectually. Jeremy wouldn't hesitate to use those attributes to protect both Lupe and Cristian.

Blood roared in his ears, blocking out voices he knew were telling him to release the woman. Frieda's hate-filled green eyes bore into him. One of her hands gripped his wrist, the other his forearm, long claws digging just as deep as his. One slice and she'd split the veins. One tear and he'd rip her jugular. He latched his other hand over her forearm but couldn't loosen her hold no matter how far he sank his claws. A fine standoff. Jeremy meant this as a warning. Frieda's sneer defied him to kill her. Blood trickled down her long neck and dripped from his wrist.

"Release her, Jeremy." Cristian's words connected in his head. Odd how relieved that made him feel—that they had that connection, whether they were human or jaguar.

"If you kill her, it will be war." That came from Joaquin, startling Jeremy enough to loosen his grip.

"It's what she wants, to prove whatever point she and her insurgents are trying to make." This came from Wyatt, and with it, the full sense of belonging to a clan.

"Unhook your talons from me," Jeremy said through clenched teeth.

"You first," she rasped out. "One rip and you're dead."

He matched the gleam in her eyes with one of his own. "So are you."

"Really?" A shimmer obscured her features for the blink of a second; then Lupe's face appeared.

Jeremy knew it was an illusion, knew the damn mountain lions could take any form. But seeing Lupe before him was enough of a distraction to give Frieda the advantage. She dug her claws deeper. Pain stoked his rage, and he responded in kind, glorying in her wince.

Steven clamped his hands over their forearms. "Stop! You're only making things worse."

Frieda jerked her hands away and resumed her normal form. As Jeremy released her, he pulled emotion inward. His claws retracted.

"I don't see how it can be much worse." She rubbed her neck, smearing blood.

Jeremy ignored his wounds, refusing to give her the satisfaction of knowing she'd injured him.

"I told you they were conducting secret experiments, Steven. Here's your proof. They've found a way to make their own shifters. Next they'll mount an army and kill us all." She glanced around at them. "I'd gladly sacrifice my life right now to eliminate every one of them in this room."

"Yes," he snapped, "because six against two are such *great odds*."

She hiked her pointed nose. "We've faced worse and won."

Wyatt cleared his throat, drawing everyone's attention. He stood there, one hand clasped over his wrist, eyebrow slightly arched. "If destruction was what you were after, Frieda, your people would have detonated all that C-4 you've got planted around this house."

Steven looked like he'd been punched in the stomach. He stared down at Frieda in shocked disbelief. "What?"

"They broke the treaty." She jerked her chin toward Jeremy's friends.

Cristian appeared at Jeremy's side and pressed wet paper towels over one of his arms. A slight tug urged him farther away from Frieda.

"What would you call espionage and explosives?" Cristian asked, taking a stance in front of Jeremy.

She snapped a finger his way. “*You* were going to steal my body!” Claws bared, she took a giant step forward.

Jeremy tensed again, ready to defend Cristian at all costs. Cristian's arm barred his way. There was nothing either of them could say to justify their actions. At least Wyatt and Joaquin could claim plausible deniability. Only Barry knew what they'd been working on, and he'd presumably kept their “wild-ass speculations” to himself.

“Guilty as charged,” Cristian freely admitted, spreading his arms wide.

His confession shocked the piss out of Jeremy, finally deflating the perpetual erection that had been plaguing him since his transformation.

“But isn't that what you'd planned to do today with me and Jeremy? To overtake the lab, kill us, and assume our identities? It wouldn't be the first time one of your clan tried to infiltrate ours, so don't throw stones my way.” Cristian shook his head. “Your people killed one of *our* women. It seemed a fitting exchange at the time. We all know what grief can do to a person. My grief misguided me. Gods only know what guides *you*. Frankly speaking, I'd welcome the C-4. At least it would end the torment I've been through since Rose was killed.”

Jeremy heard the catch in Lupe's breath and drew her under his arm. No one knew Cristian's pain better than she did. She'd been his—their—confidant all these months. The only one they could bare their souls, guilt, and anguish to without being judged. They'd clearly judged themselves enough.

Frieda tucked her arms under her ample bosom, heaving her breasts into deep cleavage. “I don't recall any angst all those times you spent fucking me.”

Lupe tensed. Jeremy tightened a hug around her to keep her from attacking the woman.

“You were a means to an end, Frieda,” Cristian calmly replied. “A vessel, nothing more.”

She jerked her chin toward Jeremy and Lupe. “Like they are?” She sniffed. “This place reeks of sex. It should be blown sky-high for that alone. One snap of my fingers and I can make you all disappear. I'm willing to sacrifice myself for the sake of my clan.”

“Enough blustering.” Wyatt took a stance next to Cristian. “We all know you want what you think is in here.” He glanced around. “Although from the look of things, there probably isn't much left.”

Jeremy watched the tension in Cristian's back muscles ease. "There isn't. The lab area appears to be completely destroyed and our laptops with it. We never did an upload or backup to the main servers. Believe it or not, this has nothing to do with any experiments. Whatever happened to change Jeremy and Lupe was an accident. A fluke."

"I'm sure you won't mind if we don't believe you." Steven looked Cristian up and down. "The lab and laptops were destroyed, and yet you don't have a mark on you."

"Everything was healed when we shifted," Cristian told him.

It was a plausible explanation no one could deny. After all, shifters did have enhanced healing abilities, just not as enhanced as Cristian's now were.

"I want full access to all the data concerning this event," Steven said. "To ensure I get that, I'm going to be up someone's ass 24-7, starting right now."

"Then how will you get any work done?" Lupe's comment was innocence personified, the sarcasm perfection, even though Cristian didn't think it was intended.

A red flush crept over Steven's sun-loved face. Jeremy bit his cheek to keep from laughing.

"We'll consider your request, after you secure the C-4 and the detonators that go with it." Cristian looked Wyatt's way. "Unless you've already taken care of that."

A slow smile spread over Wyatt's face. He tapped the comm link in his ear. "I have security personnel surrounding the place, ready to take action."

Cristian slid his gaze back to Steven. "You really didn't think Wyatt was stupid enough to come in to a hostage situation without backup, did you?"

Steven moved his green-eyed gaze from one person to the next before he finally conceded the issue and turned to Frieda. "I don't know how you managed to acquire—"

"I do what it takes to protect our people." She shoved her face close to his. "Which is more than I can say for you."

"I'm here, aren't I?" His hard breaths rustled the strands of blonde hair around her face.

"But not because we called you." She flashed Wyatt a dirty look. "Steven isn't the only one who's going to be up someone's ass 24-7." A demonic grin split her face when she looked at Cristian. "I know how much you enjoy that."

Lupe tensed, and Jeremy knew she would have pounced if he didn't have his arm around her.

Frieda's grin widened. "And I know how much you enjoy watching, little cat."

Lupe flexed her shoulders. "I've always enjoyed watching people make fools of themselves. Just remember, your ass will always bear the scar from where this *little cat* bit you."

The cat in Frieda roared to life. Steven shifted just as quickly and speared his teeth into the scruff of her neck, nailing her in place. Mountain lions had one advantage over the jaguar clan—their clothing was illusion as well. The jaguars couldn't fully shift without undressing, but each now had fully extended claws, ready to defend against attack.

Frieda yowled a protest. Steven's growl reminded her he was in charge, and he drew blood beneath his fangs. If they were arguing the point with mindspeak, those thoughts weren't transmitting to others. As far as Jeremy knew, the mountain lions couldn't mindspeak, and the jaguars had yet to tell them the ability was theirs.

The things we could learn from each other, if only we could work in peace.

He was asking the impossible. Half Steven's clan couldn't coexist with each other, never mind another clan of shifters.

A shimmer passed over the feline twosome as they returned to their previous forms, clothing once more visible.

"Enough!" Steven wrapped his fist in Frieda's long blonde hair.

"I agree," Cristian said. "We're wasting time."

Claws retracted. Hand still clenched in Frieda's hair, Steven grabbed her arm and hauled her upright. "I agree. If you can't set aside this petty behavior and approach this objectively, you won't work with me on this." He gave her a little push when he released her. "Understood?"

Frieda shrugged, hiked her chin, and smoothed her fingers through her hair. Quiet defiance answered for her. The woman would just as soon kill all of them as she would look at them. It was a wonder Cristian had survived a relationship with her. But then, they'd both had ulterior motives for keeping each other alive. That birthed a question.

"Why wait until today to kill Cristian and have someone take his place?" Jeremy asked, expecting her to deny it.

A smirk curled her lip. “Well, he was a good lay, and I am only half-human.”

So much for an answer. Jeremy should have known better. “Before we start fun and games with our friends here, the rest of us need to clean up. Lupe's going to need some clothes.”

“I'm sure between Carmen and Trina, we can come up with something until someone can take Lupe shopping,” Joaquin replied. “She's also going to need identification and documentation. I'll take care of those today.”

“She's staying?” Frieda shouted, then whipped around to Steven. “See? They *are* amassing an army against us!”

Steven heaved a weary sigh. “What else would you have them do with her? Send her to the pound? She's as human as the rest of us, and probably more so than you are right now.”

The woman shook with rage. Cristian sighed, and Jeremy felt it down to his bones. This collaboration had not gone well so far, and it looked like it was going to spiral downhill from here.

“Jeremy's right; we're exhausted. Assemble a joint technical team to evaluate this site and meet me here in the morning. And if any of you”—Cristian waved his finger at everyone—“get any ideas of coming in without the other, don't bother. I'm recoding the cipher lock and initiating lockdown. No one gets in until *I* unlock it.”

Frieda tucked her arms over her chest and cocked out her hip. “And if something happens to you?”

“Then you're screwed.” Cristian's grin held no humor. “I know how much *you* like *that*. Let's go.” He motioned everyone toward the staircase.

Barry waited at the top, looking much better for having shifted. Wyatt, Joaquin, and Steven started for the stairs. Frieda followed, then turned and barred Lupe's passage.

Lupe merely smiled. “In case there was any doubt, you won't be lying on Cristian anymore.” A purr underlined Lupe's words, sending shivers down Jeremy's spine.

Frieda nose twitched. “Maybe I'll *lay* you instead.”

“I can't see where you would be worth the effort.” Lupe brushed by and walked away. If she'd had a tail, Jeremy had no doubt she would have been flicking it all the way.

Pride filled his chest. Lust tented his lab coat.

Chapter Nine

Maybe she was still afraid.

Lupe stared at the water spewing from the nozzle that towered over her head. She might be larger now, but the thing still felt like a vicious monster coming at her from miles away. It destroyed the peace she'd felt upon returning home with Cristían and Jeremy minutes before. Apparently she'd left her bravery back in the lab. Immersing her body under the torrent was much more involved than putting her paw—her *hand*—under a mere trickle. Which was why she was still here, standing on the outside and not underneath that *thing*.

Her heart fluttered against her ribs. Now Lupe knew how birds and mice felt when she cornered them. She wouldn't be doing that again anytime soon. Well, for more reasons than one. Clearly humans didn't hunt animals the way cats did.

No, they hunted each other.

What did the jaguars do when they were in their cat forms? Maybe they explored the wild, chased game. She could imagine their inky shapes as shadows in the black night. A thrill wiggled through her. Lupe would never experience the rush of a hunt again, since she seemed incapable of shifting back.

Oh but it was worth it! She hugged herself. The wish for herself to be human finally granted. Cristían and Jeremy in her arms, loving her. Their combined scents were headier than all the cat treats in the world. Being with them was a thousand times better than she'd ever imagined, truly better than what she'd witnessed when Jeremy used his hand and Cristían romped with *her*.

Every hair on her body lifted. Lupe brushed her hands over her arms to quell the irritation that bubbled to the surface. Who did Frieda think she was, threatening her? And Jeremy...crazy fool. He'd defended her at his own risk. Though she loved him even more for it, Lupe still

wanted to bat his ears. She wasn't afraid of Frieda. She wasn't afraid of anything, except losing Cristian and Jeremy, and that fear paralyzed her in ways she could never explain.

Even more so than this hideous contraption that poured water on her, and it was pretty damn frightening, despite the pretty seashell curtain that billowed around the edges of the big white box. They could call this a bathtub and shower all they wanted, dress it in feathers and fur with sparkles of warm sunshine all over it. It still was a box, and Lupe knew firsthand the horror of boxes.

She started at a sound behind her, then calmed when she caught Cristian's scent.

"I didn't mean to startle you." The door shut behind him. "I heard the shower running and suspected you might be having some issues. It's much bigger than a faucet."

He wrapped those strong arms around her and pulled her against his nude body. His erection nestled into the small of her back.

"It feels like needles piercing my skin when I touch it." She cuddled into the protective cove of his body.

"I can adjust it to a softer flow." He reached up and turned the white nozzle.

Lupe held out a hand and felt the difference in power. It helped, but not much.

He brushed his hand over her stomach. "We could always fill the tub and bathe in it."

"No!" Old instincts screamed at her to run. She forced herself to remain still. No harm would come to her in Cristian's arms. She glanced up at him. "We? You would bathe with me?"

"I would do anything to calm your fears and ease your worries."

Yes, he would. "You would fight for me," she said, more to herself than him.

"To the last breath." He kissed her shoulder.

"You would...die for me."

"And take anyone who did you harm down with me."

She'd been in this new form less than a day, and there were already those who wanted her dead, wanted all three of them dead. Lupe smelled the bad on that person. It would shock Cristian to know who it was, or maybe not, given the strained relationship he had with that person. She'd keep it to herself for now and be ever diligent.

"Where's Jeremy?"

“Already working on trying to retrieve those hard drives from our laptops.”

Good. They were wise to not trust this enforced collaboration.

“Joaquin called. Carmen will bring clothes for you to wear in a little while. I know you'll appreciate that.”

She would, but curling up in a warm patch of sun sounded so much better. Being without fur was much colder than she'd anticipated.

“Come.” Cristian eased around her and stepped into the tub, blocking the spray from her. He extended his hand. When she grasped his fingers, he squeezed them as he gently urged her forward.

Eyeing the threat at his back and seeing he hadn't suffered for it, she stepped into the tub. Another flash of panic hit when he drew the curtain closed.

“Don't worry, little warrior. I'll take care of everything,” he whispered against her ear.

She closed her eyes and let his aura chase the fear away. The spray was nothing more than a mist.

“I'd suggest thinking about it as nothing more than rain, but I know you're not too fond of rain either, even though you tolerate it.”

They laughed, and more of her unease faded. Long fingers glided over her shoulders, spreading soap onto muscles she didn't realize were tired until that very minute. He kneaded circles down her back. Lupe moaned at the feeling, so very much like when he'd pet her. Hours of sheer pleasure with her curled in his lap while they watched television or he read.

Lupe rolled her hips from side to side when he reached her bottom. He slipped his fingers between her crack, smearing soap between her legs. She widened her stance and parted her thighs for more. Cristian indulged her silent request, parting her folds, twirling his finger inside her. Hands braced on the wall, she lifted her hips for more. He slid farther. Suds billowed in the hair at her crotch. His wrist rubbed over her clitoris. Need clawed for freedom inside her. She was going to have the glorious explosion again...if he'd only work a little harder and faster.

She clamped her thighs around his hand when he started to retreat. Her whimpered protest died with the finger he thrust inside. Lupe gasped and tossed her head back, rocking with the plunge of his fingers. His other hand came around and pressed over her clit. And just when she

knew it couldn't get any better, Lupe felt his thumb against another hole. Confusion muted her, and her body clenched against the invasion. Cristian pulled away.

"No!" Lupe grappled for his hand, trying to pull it back into position.

"I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart."

He pushed the showerhead straight down, then switched positions with her and sank to the bottom of the tub. His beautiful cock thrust up from its nest of black curls. Grinning, he cupped her hips and urged her astride him. She eased down, wary of the spray behind her but desperately wanting his erection buried to the hilt inside her. Cristian thumbed her clitoris. Fear dissipated with the pleasure that rolled through her.

Lupe sank lower. One hand guided her hips, the other cupped her neck, drawing her head down to his. She opened for him, melting a little when his tongue slipped between her lips. She tumbled into the kiss, feeling more want tug to the surface with every knead of his lips, every tongue caress. Her knees straddled his hips. His cock nudged her clit. She paused and let the sensation ripple through her, then slowly buried him inside. Cristian's groan rumbled through her.

Oh the joy of knowing she made him feel this way!

She broke the kiss and cupped his face. "I love how hot you feel, how hard."

"I know." He cleared the rasp from his throat. "You're hot, soft, and tight. Perfect." His lips covered hers again, his tongue thrusting deeper this time, like he wanted to crawl inside her this way too.

Lupe rubbed her hard nipples over his chest. He slid his fingers between them and captured the beads of flesh. Her muscles below tightened, yanking another growl from him.

He butted his forehead against hers. "I could kiss you forever and never get tired of it."

There went those emotions again. "You're squeezing my heart so tight, it's hard to breathe," she said in a rush of breath.

Cristian's hands spanned her back. "You're squeezing my heart too."

More kisses, spinning her head around, bubbling inside. Deep in her mouth, then down her throat, over her shoulders. Then back up to claim her lips once more. A *snap* followed by the scent of sesame peeled her from him. Her stomach rumbled. Sesame chicken was one of her

favorites. Lupe loved it when Cristian ordered the meal delivered. Curiosity edged out the twinge of disappointment when she saw he'd merely opened the bath oil.

He squirted some in his palm, then rubbed it over her breasts and down her stomach. Lupe leaned back a little, admiring the silky sheen, and he added a drop to her clitoris. The red bead pushed from her folds, looking for more attention. She dug her fingers into his arms to keep from touching it.

Cristian filled his palm again and set the bottle back in the corner. He rubbed his hands together, half-closed eyes watching her mouth. Lupe lifted her breasts, expecting his touch. Instead he dropped one hand to her aching clit and used the other to cup her backside.

Lupe sighed at the pleasure and arched back. Cristian scooted farther down, urging her forward. The glide of his fingers down her crack sagged her against the plane of his chest. His heart beat strong and steady, drowning out the sound of the shower. It echoed in the pulse of the cock she clutched inside her and the responding thrum of her clit. His thumb circled over it, promising release, yet she couldn't help tensing when his fingers pressed against her rear hole. He circled it now, matching the rhythm over her clitoris. Then he breached the barrier of muscle.

Tension faded with the first wave of pleasure that rolled through her. He moved slowly in and out, thumb still tracing a lazy path around her clit. Lupe rocked her pelvis with his, lost in sensation. His muscles tensed, and she knew he was holding out for her. The knowledge empowered her. She moved quicker, taking control, yet giving it to him at the same time. Release grew from a hard ball in her core. Every sense she ever had locked on to it. Then it burst open, taking him with her on a ride that not only made Lupe glad to be human but glad to be alive.

She lay sprawled on him, panting for breath, too spent to move. It made it all the more wonderful that she knew Cristian was just as overcome. As the seconds turned to minutes, the world around her returned to normal. The shower hissed behind her, and she couldn't care less.

Cristian slid upright a little more but still kept her close. He soaped his hands again and then bathed the oil and the day away. Lupe sighed and sat up. His smile warmed her. More soap, this time from another bottle. He lathered it into her hair, fingers kneading, just the way she loved.

"Now we have to rinse."

She blinked her eyes open and gave him a lazy nod. Cradling her, he dipped forward until the water barely kissed her scalp. Warm tendrils tickled through her hair, and she felt Cristian's hands helping the water rinse the soap out.

"Oh I do like that."

"I knew you would." He cupped her breast and kissed the tip before sitting upright again.

"I could fall asleep right here."

"I know how you feel." He kissed her temple. "But there's a soft bed and a mound of covers waiting for you, and I know how much you love that."

His bed. It was a favorite, but only when he was in it with her.

Cristian stood with her and shut off the water. Lupe stretched and twisted from side to side. He squeezed the excess water from her hair and tousled it further, then blotted her dry and wrapped the towel around her.

"Now...just one more thing." He snatched his comb from the vanity tray on the sink.

Lupe studied their reflections in the mirror while he combed the tangles from her hair. There was so much she had to learn. Like this.

"Does my breath smell like tuna?" she asked.

He looked up. "No...and neither does your crotch."

Lupe giggled at the mischief in his eyes. Yes, it *was* great to be alive!

Chapter Ten

Cristian braced himself against the doorjamb and watched Lupe sleep. She curled up on her side, much as she always did, burrowed under a nest of forest green covers to keep warm. He'd rummaged through his clothing and found a dark blue sweatshirt and white tube socks for her to wear until Carmen arrived with clothing. The edges of both came to her knees and, he hoped, helped generate the warmth Lupe loved so well.

He'd done a passable job at braiding her hair. All those years of making rope had come in handy. It would do until Carmen arrived with all the things women required. That alone gave him a nagging headache. There was so much Lupe had to learn about fitting in to the human world, about being human. With all the other worries plaguing his mind, Cristian didn't know where to begin to help Lupe transition.

At least they'd gone over the hurdle of bathing. That made him smile. She trusted him. He wouldn't let her down.

Duty warred with his exhaustion. He wanted nothing more than to snuggle beside her and get some sleep, but he had to talk to Jeremy while they were alone. He rubbed his eyes and pushed away from the door. Other than hauling on a clean pair of jeans, Cristian hadn't bothered to dress, and he didn't want to disturb Lupe's sleep by rooting through the dresser for a T-shirt.

He found Jeremy working in the spare bedroom that served as an office. One hard drive lay on the desk, the remains of its computer shell in pieces around it.

"Hey." Jeremy didn't turn, just kept working. "I almost have the second one out. I can't guarantee we'll be able to retrieve what's on them."

At this point, Cristian wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. He really needed Jeremy's insight to help sort this all out.

"Lupe asleep?" Jeremy asked.

"Yes. It's hard not to join her."

"I know what you mean." Jeremy looked up at him from his work, hands still moving. No one multitasked like Jeremy. "Go lie down and get some rest. I've got the watch." He tapped his small screwdriver against his ear. "I swear, I can hear a bug crawling on the tree two blocks over."

Cristían snorted. "The enhanced jaguar senses do take some getting used to, as I recall."

Jeremy turned back to the mangled laptop. "How are you doing with the new abilities?"

He shrugged. "Fine. I suppose. We need to talk."

That brought Jeremy around to face him again. "All right."

"Not here. I need to know I have all your attention, Jeremy. You know this could be the last time in a long time someone isn't monitoring us."

Jeremy glanced from Cristían to the laptop and then back, debating his priorities. He set his screwdriver down and got up. "You've got it."

They settled in the living room on opposite ends of the moss green sofa. They sank into the depths of the pillowed cushions with a sigh. Jeremy pulled his knee up and leaned against the sofa arm to face Cristían. Cristían pulled in a breath and did the same. Where should he start?

"This might seem a little far-fetched." He ran a hand through his hair. "I can barely believe it myself, and I'm having trouble making sense of it all," he said. "It's so much more than what we discussed earlier."

Jeremy nodded. "After all I've seen and experienced in the last year, I don't think of anything as being far-fetched. Look at me." He waved his hand over his body and smiled.

Cristían tried to return his smile but couldn't manage.

Jeremy nudged his shoulder. "Hey, it's me."

He pulled in another breath. "Okay... When we... After the accident, I went somewhere. At first I was scared to death I'd been somehow transported back to that damned cenote."

Jeremy shivered, and Cristían knew it wasn't intentional. They'd battled evil in that place and nearly lost.

"Then my mind opened and connected with a greater something. It was beautiful. Perfect. Deep violet, then a swirling golden ball that sank into me. I felt...purged and reborn. There was this massive white light, and all this knowledge poured into me. Everything that ever was, is, and

will be. Then the light lifted, and the ball returned to the void, taking all that knowledge with it and leaving me with bits and pieces that have me more confused than ever. I'm still being fed snippets of information or flashes of insight, but none of the skills to determine what it all means.”

“You mentioned that before, and I glossed over it at the time, what with everything else going on. I'm sorry. Can you tell me now what kind of information?” Jeremy's soft voice offered solace and understanding, as well as the willingness to logically and objectively evaluate the experience.

Another deep breath shored Cristian's resolve, helped him order his words and thoughts. “That I've created a monster that will destroy what remains of a once-great civilization—a *skinwalker*. That I am the one responsible for unleashing that menace on my clan all those centuries before. That only we can stop it.” It was rather stupid, hearing that out loud. All that was in the past. How could anything they'd done here affect it? Concepts twisted inside his head and knotted his gut, along with his thoughts. Was that really what he'd heard, or had he built a tale to go with the few words he clearly recalled?

Jeremy scooted closer and put his hand on Cristian's knee. “All right. I've been thinking about everything I experienced too. Let's take a small step back and evaluate this from a logical, scientific standpoint first.”

Logic and science were exactly what they needed. Cristian nodded for him to continue.

“The last words out of Barry's mouth accused you of being a skinwalker. Then all hell broke loose. Clearly we've all been changed, and we're going to consider that a separate issue for now. One thing at a time.” He patted Cristian's knee and leaned back. “No one's body withstands the type of impact we all experienced without some injury. The tertiary impact alone should at least have put us in the hospital, even the morgue. I'm surprised any of us were left standing, but I attribute that to the metamorphosis. Other than what looks like a birthmark on Lupe's ribs, her body is free of any marks or scars, no sign of injury either. I had cuts and bruises, and they healed instantly. Granted, not as quickly as yours... Consider for a moment you received a concussion. Barry's words are spinning around in your mind, as are the colors purple and gold from my experiment. I can explain away the extra strength you have as a possible adrenaline rush, and for the sake of argument, let's add that to our hypothesis. For whatever reason, you also

have extra-enhanced healing abilities beyond those of a normal shifter. Perhaps all these things combined to cause this perception.”

It did make sense. Cristían's blinding headache, the flash of white, the dark void from having blacked out, even the adrenaline charge. But... “After the three of us had sex, I sensed you'd been there too. Our minds were linked. When I asked you—”

Jeremy dropped his gaze. “Yes, it felt like home to me.” He glanced up under his lashes. “At the time, I thought I was in the Akashic Field. Now that I look back, I realize it was the rush of shifting coupled with some killer sex. And I took a whack to the head too.”

“And you believe it was nothing more?” He bent to catch Jeremy's gaze when he glanced away.

Jeremy gave a halfhearted chuckle. “I don't know what to believe. I'm just trying to explain in logical terms for now. It *was* the best sex I've ever had, and I've had a lot of sex.” He pulled his chin up. Humor faded to a dead-on scowl. “One thing I'm not willing to believe is that any of us are skinwalkers.”

“And on the off chance that we are?”

“If it's me, then kill me.” Jeremy didn't blink. He meant it. They both knew the havoc skinwalkers could wreak. The skinwalker beast killed without conscience, taking over the body and life of its prey and destroying anyone who stood in its way.

“I would expect the same courtesy from you,” Cristían said.

“Absolutely.” Jeremy smirked. “Although considering how quickly you heal, that might be next to impossible.”

Horror choked Cristían. Jeremy realized the impact of his words instantly and reached out. Cristían burst to his feet before Jeremy could touch him.

“It's me!” He clutched his head against the pain inside. He'd created the thing most feared, most reviled by his people. How long before the hunger for power overtook him? How long before he targeted a new host?

“Stop it.” Jeremy yanked him back onto the sofa and kept him in place with a firm hand on his thigh. “We are all exhausted. Don't let your imagination run away with you. You're gripping your head. It must hurt. So you're not all that impervious to pain. Calm down and think, Cristían. We've never jumped to conclusions before; let's not start now. You know both clans are going to

want to run every test known to mankind on the three of us. Let's do what we do best—evaluate the data.”

Jeremy's tone calmed Cristian's racing heart. He *was* tired, bone tired, and incapable of mustering any response.

“Go rest.” Jeremy squeezed his shoulder. “You know how Lupe hates to sleep alone. I'm surprised she's stayed in the bed without one of us. I've got things covered.”

Cristian nodded. “Don't let me sleep more than two hours. You need some rest too.”

Jeremy smiled. “It's a deal.”

It took more effort than he wanted to admit to walk back to the bedroom. Lead weighted his steps. Even thinking hurt. Cristian left the door open and his jeans on. If he had to get up in a hurry, he wanted nothing slowing him down. He stretched out beside Lupe. She rolled his way, snuggling as close as the covers allowed. He draped his arm around her, needing the comfort and security as much as she did. Maybe even more. With a sigh, he closed his eyes. Sleep pulled him under.

* * * *

Protect.

The word called to Jeremy from that place he'd just tried to rationalize couldn't exist. He couldn't deny it, didn't want to. It felt right. With the first tickle over his skin, he undressed. He prided himself on recognizing that the shift was upon him. The transformation began before he was fully naked. Control was getting easier to master. A few more times and he'd have it nailed.

Muscle rippled under his black fur. He stretched like he'd seen Lupe do so many times, and power charged his system. His tail swept the air behind him. Jeremy lifted his nose, seeking the scent of those who did not belong. All he smelled were Cristian and Lupe.

Good.

He prowled to the doors and double-checked the locks. The drapes were closed on all the windows. All secure. God help the fool who tried to cross him.

He wandered to the bedroom where Lupe and Cristian slept. Even in sleep, a frown furrowed Cristian's brow. Jeremy didn't blame him. Skinwalkers. It was impossible to believe, yet he'd learned this last year that nothing was impossible. Even as he tried to explain it all away,

something still nagged at him to look beyond the logic and accept. Like Cristian, Jeremy didn't know how he could do that if he didn't understand what Cristian was being told.

He chased the thoughts away with a shake of his head. The movement wiggled down his long body. His focus now was to make sure they were safe. Nothing mattered but them.

This is what love and devotion are all about. A pity it had taken him a lifetime to realize that. Jeremy treasured the gift. This was one he wouldn't squander or take for granted.

He draped his body across the threshold and let his new senses expand, beyond the room, beyond the house. Alert and ready to do whatever it took to keep them safe, and scared to death of what he might ultimately be forced to do.

Protect, that inner voice reminded.

Jeremy nodded and locked everything else out of his head but that one command. Survival came in many forms. This was but one.

"You'll be more comfortable on the bed with us."

Jeremy turned his gaze toward Cristian. *"I thought you were asleep."*

"I'm a light sleeper. Comes with being a jaguar shifter."

He glanced at Lupe. *"But apparently not for cats."*

"She trusts us to keep her safe. We will. Come. Rest. You're tired too. It's safe enough. We won't be caught unaware."

The comfort and security of being with them was too much to resist. Jeremy hopped to all fours and walked toward the bed, shifting into human form halfway there. Cristian's broad smile approved his skill. He scooted to the edge of the queen-size bed, pulling Lupe with him. Jeremy stretched out on the other side and draped his arm around her. Lupe wiggled deeper into their embrace with a sigh. Peace and unconditional love wrapped their arms around him.

Yes, survival did come in many forms.

Chapter Eleven

Hunger and the smell of salmon cooking pulled Lupe from a contented sleep. “Mmm, I love salmon.” She curled into the warm body next to her.

Jeremy draped his arm around her and kissed her forehead. “Cristían really knows how to pull a person out of bed.”

Her rumbling stomach agreed. Jeremy gave her another kiss and rolled out of bed. Stretching, she watched him step into jeans, then pull a red T-shirt over his head. He combed through his mussed hair and caught her reflection in the mirror.

“Carmen and Joaquin should be here soon with clothes for you. They're joining us for dinner.”

Lupe stretched again and peeled the covers back. “You were sweet to stay in bed with me while Cristían went for groceries.”

His grin lit her heart. “It was my pleasure. I know you don't like sleeping alone.”

True. As a cat, she'd followed them wherever they went and curled up in a location where she could keep one eye always on them. That wasn't going to be possible anymore.

“I'm going to see if Cristían needs any help. Coming?”

“In a minute.”

He returned to the bed, braced his hands on the mattress, and kissed her again. It was so much better than a scratch behind the ears.

Lupe admired his rear view when he turned and left. An image of that long, black tail fanning the air wiggled through her. She'd always been a sucker for a big tail.

She sat up on another stretch and admired her image in the dresser mirror. She brushed her fingers over the sweatshirt, feeling her nipples harden when the subtle scent of Cristían escaped

the soft fibers. Unable to resist the urge to see herself more fully, Lupe peeled the sweatshirt up and over her head.

Yes, she was perfect, except for the small brown dots on her ribs, and those weren't very large at all. But now that she really had a chance to look at it, Lupe decided she rather liked the unique pattern. It looked like two people standing side by side, arms around each other's shoulders, friends...lovers.

Wisps of hair had escaped the braid and now framed her face. She wasn't sure if she liked the look. It hid all those marvelous colors. But she could see where the braid would come in handy if she were in a fight—nothing to block her eyes. Without her teeth and claws, Lupe would need every advantage.

She hauled the sweatshirt back over her head and stuffed her arms through the sleeves. *Success!* Winning always gave her a rush. Shoulders back, she sought the kitchen. Her mouth watered with every step she took as the delicious smell of fresh fish filled her senses.

The men greeted her with smiles that Lupe returned. Cristian worked at the stove, while Jeremy put dishes on the table. Her gaze fell to the table setting. Another something she had to master—utensils.

“How much longer?” she asked.

“About ten minutes,” Cristian replied.

An eternity. Lupe eyed the upper cabinet where her treats were. Another advantage to being human—not only could she reach the cabinet, she could open it!

“You'll spoil your dinner,” Cristian warned when she reached for the door. He knew her too well.

Lupe narrowed her gaze. “Did you eat them all?”

Cristian laughed and pulled the door open. She grabbed the can before he could stop her and yanked off the lid. The aroma wafted into her nose. Pleasure shuddered down her spine.

“Share?” Cristian held out his palm. Lupe shook a few treats into his hand, then did the same for herself. They popped them into their mouths at the same time.

“You two are sick,” Jeremy scoffed.

“Don't knock it till you try it.” Cristian snickered and took a few more.

Lupe picked up a morsel and waved it before Jeremy's face. His eyes tracked it back and forth. "You know you want it," she teased.

The doorbell saved him, but Cristian darted to answer it before Jeremy could move. "Consider it payback for all the times you deviled Lupe with a treat," he said over his shoulder.

Lupe giggled and put the bite a whisper away from Jeremy's lips. "Should I make you sit like a dog or roll over and show your belly?"

"I suppose apologizing isn't going to work?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Make it up to me. Just one taste. Chewed and swallowed."

Jeremy winced and wrapped his lips around the tidbit. His grimace grew. He chewed once, swallowed, and washed it down with a glass of tap water. Lupe laughed until her eyes leaked.

"Someone's having entirely too much fun."

Breath held, Lupe turned at the woman's voice. Carmen Valera smiled down at her. She was peace and love, kindness and acceptance. Lupe had always known these things about her. While other mothers she had known in the past shrieked if Lupe dared look at their children, Carmen had always invited her to her daughters' sides. Words of praise and devotion rained down upon her. Lupe loved those baby girls with a passion she couldn't explain. Now, seeing Carmen on this level...

"Little sister." Carmen wrapped her arms around Lupe, pulling her close.

Yes, this was what it felt like...sisters.

"Trina was very excited about the news." Carmen brushed the wisps of hair away from Lupe's face. "She wants to see you so badly, but carrying triplets isn't easy. The doctor insists she stay off her feet as much as possible. Perhaps you'd like to go to her?"

"I would so love that!" She glanced around. "Did you bring the girls?"

Carmen laughed lightly. "They are home with one of their doting uncles. Hopefully sound asleep." She held Lupe at arm's length. "Let's have a look at you." Less than a breath later she declared Lupe "exquisitely perfect."

Pride swelled her heart. "And look what else I have." She started to peel up the sweatshirt to show Carmen the pretty design on her ribs.

Carmen placed gentle hands over hers. "Let's not tease the men with what they can't have right now. I see Cristian has dinner almost ready. I brought some clothes for you. Let's make you more comfortable." Taking Lupe's hand, Carmen led her toward the bedroom, snagging two large plastic bags from Joaquin as they went.

"We did the best we could on size." Carmen shut the door and tossed the bags on the rumpled bed. "You and I will go shopping tomorrow, after the doctors check you out." She sat down and began opening a bag.

Lupe jerked to a stop. "Doctors?"

"To make sure the three of you are all right." A partial lie. Lupe could see it in her aura. Carmen glanced up and sighed. "Perceptive too. Very good, sister cat." She brushed her soft fingers down Lupe's cheek. "You and Jeremy are unique. We need to find out why. We'll draw blood, do physical exams, run scans with our equipment. You'll need to go without breakfast."

Lupe didn't like the sound of that. "Thank you for your honesty."

Carmen gave a nod and opened the first bag. "When Joaquin told me you were petite, I knew I didn't have anything in my closet that would fit, so we did some quick shopping for you. Besides, the personal items needed to be yours alone. I decided on small sizes that are stretchy. We'll have to roll up the cuffs on the pants, and the loafers might be too big, but wearing extra socks will solve that. Joaquin said you could manage without a bra. I believe he's correct."

Lupe glanced down. "He noticed my breasts?"

Carmen laughed. "Men, no matter what the species, always notice what they like the most." She sprung a claw and cut the tags off a thin black sweater.

"Those are very convenient. I wish... Never mind." Lupe pulled the sweatshirt and white socks she wore off, then rifled through the second bag. Silky undergarments, thick black socks, a hairbrush, and various other items she'd seen over the course of her six years were nestled inside. Her heart beat so hard, Lupe could barely stand it. "Thank you, Carmen."

Smiling, Carmen pulled her head up. "You're very welcome." Her gaze dropped to the marks on Lupe's ribs. Her eyes widened a bit before she glanced away to look at a pair of pants.

Lupe gasped and tried to cover the marks. "Oh no...it's ugly, isn't it? And here I thought it was so pretty, so special."

"It's not ugly, not at all," Carmen quickly replied. "It's beautiful and very special. It humbles me." Wonder filled her tone. She pressed her fingers against her lips. Water filled her eyes. "For me, it's a sign you've been blessed by the stars. Meant to be who you are now."

Lupe squatted before her, resting her fingers on Carmen's knees. "That makes you sad?"

"No." She shook her head. "It makes me very happy."

"But you are leaking water." She scolded herself and shook her head. "I mean, you are crying."

"Happy tears. I know, it's confusing." Carmen sniffled and cupped Lupe's cheek and smiled. "We should hurry. Dinner's ready. Need help?"

"No. I have watched for years."

"Your nature serves you well."

Carmen removed the remainder of the tags while Lupe dressed, then helped Lupe brush her hair.

"Some things are harder than they look," she said with a laugh as Carmen helped her by pulling the bristles through the thick strands.

"You'll master them in no time." She set the brush down on the dresser. "I'm starving. Let's go eat."

Lupe danced ahead of her. "Cristian made salmon. I love salmon. And...we have cat treats."

Carmen's eyes widened with delight. "I love those! I can eat the whole can."

"Jeremy doesn't," she whispered as they neared the men.

"Really?" Carmen smiled at the men, walked right to the can on the counter, and helped herself.

Jeremy scrunched his face, then turned a pale shade of green when Carmen tossed one to Joaquin, who caught it with the snap of his mouth.

"Get used to it, buddy." Cristian clapped him on the back. "It's one of the joys of being feline."

"I'll stick to salmon, thank you." He pulled a chair out for Lupe to sit. "You look very nice."

“And warm.” She brushed her arms and slid into place. “This sweater feels soft as fur. Carmen helped me with my hair too. She’s very patient. A good teacher. A good mother.”

“Thank you, Lupe.” She sat across the table from her, next to Joaquin. “And you’ll be an excellent aunt for our daughters. They loved you before and will love you even more now. You have great maternal instincts. Have you ever been a mother?”

Hurt shocked through her. She glanced at her plate. The salmon, asparagus, and tiny potatoes didn’t look so appealing through tears. There was nothing Lupe could do to hide her emotion. She knew everything about Cristian and Jeremy—their fears, goals, disappointments, lives. They knew little of her, except that she loved them and was great in battle.

She sniffed and pulled her chin up. “Once. Six squinty fur balls. Each was a different color. One had all my colors. The human children and their mother told me they were beautiful, and that I was a good mother. I was so proud. But then their father came in after they were asleep, shoved us in a box, and took us away. He threw us in the water. I tried to save them but couldn’t.”

Tears drifted to her chin and plopped on her hands, matching Carmen’s tears. Lupe glanced at the others. They were all crying, sharing the grief with her. She was blessed by the stars to have such wonderful friends. “A boy found me, and his parents put me in a cage. I went to a place where there were a lot of cages. Everyone was frightened. Mrs. Wallace took me to her home and knew how much I hated being cooped up. She let me live as I wanted, free to explore the wild and learn. She let me choose my life. I chose to live with Trina. And now I choose to live with Cristian and Jeremy. But I would love to have babies again. I loved mine so.”

Jeremy slid his fingers over hers. “You know that might not be possible, Lups.”

“Anything’s possible. Look at us.” She smeared her cheeks clear and tried to smile. “Now...help me figure out this fork thing before I just dive in with my fingers.”

“I could feed you.” He carved off a flaky piece of salmon and held it before her lips.

Lupe’s mouth watered, but she could see the mischief in his eyes. “Now why do I think you plan to tease me?”

“Please, my friends...” Standing, Joaquin reached across the table and wrapped Lupe’s fingers around her fork. “The two of you are sending off a tidal wave of pheromones. Try to rein it in, or we’ll have a mating frenzy on our paws.”

Lupe glanced at the bulge in his trousers. Heat rushed her from head to toe. Should she apologize or be proud she'd created such a response? She looked to Carmen for advice. The woman merely smiled and lifted a taste of salmon to her full lips. That was Lupe's goal—to be a true lady, like Carmen and Trina. Holding the fork, she copied Carmen's actions.

Yes. Success!

She dared a peek at Cristian for approval. He was lost in his own thoughts, and she knew he was thinking about the babies she'd lost, how she'd feared water.

Lupe slipped her hand over his. “My fear is gone, thanks to you. Hunting the man who killed my babies will serve no purpose. There will always be those who view all animals as the enemy. He will suffer in his own way. Please don't risk yourself by trying to go after him. I can't bear the thought. Besides”—his dark gaze finally locked onto her face—“how can I have new babies, without you here to give them to me? You can't make Jeremy do all the work.”

“There go those pheromones again.” Jeremy chuckled.

“Yes,” Joaquin softly replied. “There they go.”

Carmen patted his thigh. “We will have an interesting night, my love.”

He pulled her fingers to his lips. “I can promise you that. Pray the girls sleep through the night.” He kissed her hand and released her. “I have the documentation you'll need for now to exist in the human world, Lupe.” He placed an envelope on the table and slid it her way. “We've become extremely adept at maintaining cover over the millennia. No one will question these. We'll get a photo of you tomorrow at the institute and get you a passport and California identification card.”

Lupe slipped the papers free—a Social Security card and birth certificate. “Guadalupe Linard?”

Forks clattered to their plates.

“You can read.” Awe framed Jeremy's words.

Lupe scowled at him. “Of course I can read. I watched *Sesame Street* with the children of my first family. I love watching TV.”

“Can you...write?” Joaquin asked.

She clicked her tongue. "It's a little difficult to hold a pen with a paw. Something I would think you'd already know."

Carmen smirked. "True. I'm sure you'll learn in no time." She tapped the birth certificate. "We've made you my younger sister. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all." Lupe maneuvered salmon onto her fork. "I am deeply honored."

"As we all are to have you with us."

Tears welled up and spilled over her lashes. She flicked them away on a laugh. "Oh...*these* are what happy tears are?"

"Indeed," Carmen declared and bit the tip off an asparagus stalk. "Mmm...just like grass."

"I know." Lupe chewed the salmon. "It's enough to make me want to *purr*."

Muffled groans rumbled from the men. Carmen winked at her and covered her smirk with another bite. Yes, definitely pride filling her heart this time. Want filled other parts of her, and a new hunger grew.

Now this is power.

She reminded herself not to abuse it, but she was definitely going to use it to her advantage...and their mutual pleasure.

* * * *

"She's innocent yet worldly at the same time."

Did Joaquin expect Cristian to respond to the obvious? The three of them sat on the back patio, enjoying the cool, clear night while Carmen and Lupe discussed "female" matters inside.

"The innocence fades with each task she masters." Jeremy scratched the stubble on his cheek and stared into the bushes. "It's like she was born to be this person."

"Carmen told me she bears the mark of Gemini on her ribs," Joaquin said.

"We saw it." It was the first time Cristian had spoken since they'd come outside thirty minutes before. "Although I didn't recognize it as resembling the constellation until you mentioned it. Some of Jeremy's experiment splashed her in that area. At first I wondered if the marks were from that. But they're brown, not red like a chemical burn, very much like a pigmentation discoloration. Do you suppose it's always been there, or that it's a result of her change or the chemicals?"

“Hard to say.” A careful response. “Maybe we’ll find out more during tomorrow’s examination.”

A few more minutes ticked by.

Jeremy pulled in a breath. “Do you think she’s fertile?”

That had been on Cristían’s mind too, as well as a few other things.

Joaquin picked up a stick that had fallen from one of the fruitless mulberry trees around them and started to strip the bark. “It sounds like she’s spent some time in an animal shelter. They normally spay animals before releasing them to new homes.”

“Wouldn’t she bear the scar?” Cristían drummed his fingers on his thigh. “There’s not a mark on her, other than on her ribs.” All his scars had disappeared too, so that really didn’t explain anything. Unless she’d changed as he had, and they hadn’t discovered that yet.

“Hmm.” Joaquin had become the king of nonresponses tonight. “We could ask this Mrs. Wallace, the lady who took her from the shelter. Her house is nearby, isn’t it?”

“She passed away several months ago.” A blessing, really. The woman told too many people about how she’d seen men change into mountain lions and jaguars. The tale made its way back to her children. Convinced she was suffering from dementia, they tried to force the old woman into a care facility. Mrs. Wallace, ever determined to have her way, defied them all when she passed away in her sleep. She’d been a kindhearted soul, who never faulted him for Lupe’s residence change and was continually trying to feed him. Cristían missed her. He hadn’t been mothered in centuries.

“Carmen and Trina feel Lupe’s well-being would be best served if she stayed with us for the time being,” Joaquin said. Funny that it had taken all this time for him to say what was really on his mind.

“No,” Cristían and Jeremy replied in unison.

“That would upset her very much,” Jeremy added. “I won’t allow that. I won’t betray her love. I won’t have her frightened and thinking we’re deserting her.”

Joaquin snapped the twig in two and lifted his ankle to his knee. “Even if it’s in her best interests?”

"She wouldn't see it that way, and neither would I." Cristian kept his voice calm; shouting would serve no purpose. "We three stay together."

"Three now one?"

"Yes." Again replied in unison.

This time Cristian provided the addendum, "If being with us put Lupe in danger, then we would go wherever we had to in order to make her safe. Even if it meant leaving all we know behind."

Panic welled inside his chest with the images that flashed in his head. The danger was here and now, caused by him. He shoved to his feet and strode toward the farthest edge of the patio to hide his shaking. He didn't know whom he was trying to fool. It didn't take a genius to see he was upset. He half expected one of them to come up behind him and give him a back clap or hug or something. Frankly Cristian was glad they didn't. One touch and the fortress around his fears would tumble.

"Then I'm sure you realize it would be prudent to take precautions against conception," Joaquin said.

Cristian snorted. "Considering our fertility rate is close to nonexistent, I'm not concerned."

Joaquin strolled his way. "I'd say that curse is broken. Carmen and I just had twins. Trina and Wyatt are about to have triplets. And don't forget, Rose was pregnant when she was killed."

As if he could ever forget. She'd carried clan children. One or both of them could have been his. Rose took pleasure in not being mated to one man. She had belonged to them all.

"Carmen and I are taking every precaution." Joaquin snickered. "We love our daughters and want more, but right now those little six-month-olds are kicking our asses." He cupped Cristian's shoulder. "Lupe is so new to the world. We don't know what a pregnancy will do to her."

"If she can get pregnant at all," Jeremy added.

Joaquin turned a frown his way. "You both claim to care about her. Do you really want to risk it?"

“No, of course not.” Cristían rubbed at the nagging ache in his head. Even with his eyes closed, he could see flashes of tiny white fireworks exploding. “I can't remember the last time I used protection. I hope to hell I remember how to use the damn things.”

Joaquin dropped his hand. “You've been having unprotected sex with Frieda all this time?”

He had no defense. The jaguars' fertility rate was close to nil, they didn't contract diseases, and frankly, it never occurred to him, since Frieda was of a shifter race. He'd been...stupid.

Joaquin tsk-tsked.

“We expect she'll be at the institute tomorrow to monitor these tests.” He opened his eyes to Joaquin's scowl. “We'll test her as well.”

“Good luck with that.” Joaquin snorted. “They've refused medical assessment since we met them. Why would they agree now?”

Cristían threw up his hands, frustrated with the conversation and his own stupidity. “We'll find a way. I've got a drugstore run to make.” He brushed between the two men.

“Because you can't leave her alone for one night?”

It sounded too close to a taunt for Cristían. He whirled around. “Could *you*? I saw your reaction when you scented the rush of pheromones. Hell, I could smell your reaction. It wouldn't surprise me to learn another Valera is on the way after tonight. Those scents scream at us to leave all precautions aside. Deny it.”

Joaquin gave Cristían and Jeremy a halfhearted smile and lifted his palms. “I can't. It was all Carmen and I could do to fight the urge and not draw you all into a full-fledged mating. It's our nature to run, explore the night, and all be together. Finding a new member makes it all the more tempting. Jeremy's and Lupe's calls are intoxicating. One sniff set our heads to buzzing and the blood boiling. So strong, it drowned you out completely.”

Cristían's heart stuttered. “What do you mean?” He pressed his fist to his chest and ordered himself to breathe.

“It overwhelmed everything else in the room. We could scent nothing but them. Not the food, not you, barely each other.” He gave a light laugh. “Hells, we couldn't even feel you. If we couldn't see you, we wouldn't have known you were there.”

Jeremy's hand against his back kept Cristían from stumbling toward the nearest chair. His heart rate tripled. Fear overtook his mind. *Skinwalker*.

"Yes, Lupe and I really need to learn how to control it," Jeremy said. "I'm sure with everyone's guidance, we'll master that in no time."

Joaquin laughed. "Even at our age and with all our experience, I'm not sure any of us have mastered it. It's because you're new. Not only does it make your pheromones stronger, it's new to us and calls to our nature. That will eventually settle. In the meantime, the rest of us need to exercise appropriate restraint."

A subtle rebuke to remind Cristían he was older and wiser? Cristían didn't appreciate it, but at least his irritation chased the paralyzing fear away. "I'm going to the drugstore." He turned to Jeremy. "Extra-large for you, right?"

Heat pulsed off Jeremy. Cristían could smell the erection building. Judging from Joaquin's sharp intake of breath, he could too. Then he watched the men's gazes drift over his shoulder. Nostrils flared and noses lifted for a better sniff. Cristían scented Lupe then, moving nearer to the patio door. Carmen was with her, barely a dot on his radar. Every sense homed in on Lupe.

He heard the doorknob twist and turned as the women stepped outside. Lupe's eyes glowed. No! *She* glowed. Crystalline waves of energy rolled their way, ensnaring everyone in their path.

Carmen darted around her and pulled Joaquin free. "It's time we leave, love. Lupe's not the only one in heat right now."

"You'll never make it to the car," Cristían muttered.

"True." Joaquin cupped Carmen's ass and anchored her against his body. "But you'll never make it to the drugstore."

No, he wouldn't, and he didn't bother to muster an excuse. Not that Joaquin would have heard. Carmen maneuvered him through and out of the house as fast as she could. Clearly a woman in charge, just like the one who mesmerized him and Jeremy right now.

Once the front door shut behind Joaquin and Carmen, Lupe's sultry smile turned full force on Cristían and Jeremy. Their simultaneous growls rumbled in their chests. She crooked her finger and backed into the house, step-by-step. He imagined a tendril of light curling from her finger, wrapping a leash around his cock. Cristían hauled his shirt over his head and balled it in

his fist. Jeremy was already two strides ahead of him. Lupe rewarded his speed by peeling off her sweater. Pert breasts dotted with upthrust nipples called them closer. She shook her mane of hair, and Cristian's jaw dropped at the sight of the riot of color falling down her back. The colors grew richer in the light, gleaming like the rest of her.

Cristian took the lead, tossing his shirt into the air and not giving a damn where it landed. His other hand snapped around Lupe's waist, fingers crawling up into her thick hair. He lifted her off her toes, mouth claiming hers when she flicked her hot tongue over his chin. She curled her leg over his hip and rocked her crotch over his erection. Cristian's knees buckled. How could one touch have him so close to coming?

He felt Jeremy's heat behind Lupe and pulled from the kiss. Jeremy braced her against Cristian, no clothing restricted him now.

"He's way ahead of us."

Her voice purred over him. Cristian wondered how firm a hold Jeremy had. He was ready to fuck her where they stood.

She slid her leg down and wiggled until her toes touched the floor. She wasn't there long. Jeremy sank onto the couch, taking her with him. He cupped her breasts while he nibbled the tendon along her neck. Lupe gasped and arched into him. Cristian shoved his clothing off, fighting the need to claw it to shreds just to be nude. Jeremy tugged Lupe's pants down her hips, and she writhed, trying to free herself of them. Cristian grabbed the legs and pulled them down and off. The smell of her pussy, the sight of it dampening her panties, made his head swim.

Fangs elongated. He fell to his knees before her open thighs, growling when a brush of Jeremy's fingers urged them farther apart. She lifted one hand up and behind to clasp Jeremy's head. The other fought her panties. Jeremy growled, sprang a claw of his own, and sliced the silky material in two. Cristian caught the crotch between his teeth and pulled it away. A shake of his head sent the panties sailing across the room, and he dove in to taste her juices before the silk could whisper to a landing.

He combed his fangs through her pubic hair, inhaling her scent while he tried to rein the jaguar in him to a manageable level. Lupe draped one leg over his shoulder, but it was Jeremy's hand that cupped his head and urged him to continue. Cristian's tail lengthened. He flicked the end over Lupe's nipples, then wrapped it around Jeremy's wrist in a firm but gentle hold.

“I bet you'd like that around your cock, wouldn't you?” he rumbled against Lupe's pussy.

Jeremy groaned and thrust. Lupe gasped and tried to wiggle higher. Cristian stilled her hips, spread her labia, and lowered his mouth over her ripe clit. He twirled his tongue over the swollen flesh, moaning when Jeremy wrapped his fingers around Cristian's tail and used the tip to play with her nipples. Cristian dug his fingers into her hips in a desperate effort to keep from stroking his cock, but still they rocked under the force of Jeremy's thrusts and Lupe's approaching orgasm.

She came on a mewl that clenched his balls. He sucked her over the top, ready to do it all over, again and again. Then she took charge.

Lupe wedged her heels against his shoulders and pushed him away. Before he or Jeremy could wage a full protest, she sank to the floor and turned her ass toward him. She ran her tongue up Jeremy's cock, then swallowed it down and wiggled her breasts against his balls.

Cristian fisted his dick and knelt behind her. Lupe spread her thighs and raised her ass more. Pussy lips, red and glistening, screamed his name. He sank into her heat, then cried out when she clamped on. His cock wasn't going anywhere until she was fully satisfied. Cristian flicked his tail around and over her clit. Lupe's groan set Jeremy off. Jaw clenched, he cupped her head and stabbed into her mouth. Cristian closed his eyes against the image, trying not to come too quickly. The grunts and groans, Lupe writhing on his cock with every flick of his tail against her clit, undermined his efforts. He had to see and savor every moment.

He slithered his tail higher, seeking her nipples. Lupe gasped and writhed for more. He smacked her clit again and pounded into her pussy. Lupe met every thrust, and he swore she pulled him deeper, gripped him harder. He started to come and tried to fight it.

Lupe jerked her head up, releasing Jeremy's cock. “No! Come!” She reached between their legs and cupped Cristian's sac. He plunged deep and let go. She milked his testicles until he swore there wasn't an ounce of fluid left in his body. The minute his penis grew flaccid, she pulled free and mounted Jeremy. She grabbed Cristian's tail and flicked it over her clitoris. Dazed and exhausted, he heard them come and somehow managed to wrap his arms around them at that pivotal moment. He saw the indigo field, felt the shower of gold sparkles inside it, sank into the emotion that blanketed them as one.

He opened his eyes to find Jeremy staring at him. Jeremy gave a single nod, acknowledging he'd been there too. "Star seeds," he whispered. "I saw star seeds."

Another one of Lupe's wishes had just come true, or would be coming true soon. So hard to tell the difference between here-and-now events, those for the future, and whether any of it was really true.

Cristían didn't want to dissect anything more. They deserved to bask in the moment, remember in the time to come how supreme this joining was for them. They'd piece the other puzzle together in the harsh light of day...somehow.

Jeremy cupped Lupe's head against his chest, then wrapped his fingers around Cristían's forearm. Words weren't necessary. This said it all. Cristían shoved his worry, fear, and confusion to the edge of the indigo void and tried to savor the hope of new life now growing between them and not wonder if these babies were the monsters he'd been warned about, or what he would do if they were.

Chapter Twelve

"I smell Steven." Lupe's head came up so fast, she barely missed Cristian's chin. She lifted her nose for another whiff. "Yes, I'd recognize his scent anywhere."

Still trapped beneath them, Jeremy said, "I think I'm jealous."

Cristian knew *he* was. He didn't want Lupe sniffing up anyone but them.

"He has a good smell," Lupe said. "A good light."

Cristian eased his weight from them to check it out. Now that the pheromones were at a manageable level and the dinner smells dissipated, Cristian scented Steven too. The man hadn't been here long, otherwise Cristian, Joaquin, or even Jeremy would have discovered him when they were on the patio. He grabbed his jeans and tossed Jeremy's to him.

"What do you suppose he wants?" Jeremy hauled on his jeans and took a step toward the door as he zipped.

"He's alone and near." Lupe wandered to the front door, still beautifully nude.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Jeremy hooked her arm. "Clothes, sweetheart. I'm sure you smell way good to him too. If he sees you like this, you're going to have another horny guy to deal with, and I don't want his paws near you."

A small line appeared between her eyebrows. "Horny...I've never understood..." Her green eyes widened. "Oh...*horny*." She pointed at Jeremy's penis. "Like that forms a horn. Hard as a bone. Oh...a *boner*. And then woody. *Now* I get it."

"Yes, Lups. Just like that. Enough, please." Even the mention made Cristian hard again.

Steven's smell changed from human to cat. The roof creaked under his weight. Considering the trigger-happy vigilantes living in the neighborhood, shifting was the worst thing Steven could have done.

Cristian grabbed Lupe's shirt and pants and shoved them into her arms on his way to the door. "We've got to get him inside before someone sees him."

A shot rang out before Cristian could wrap his hand around the doorknob. A yowl and thud followed. Steven tumbled down the roof; claws screeched over the clay tiles. Nails on a chalkboard paled in comparison. Cristian ran in the direction of his fall, foolishly hoping to be able to brace his impact and prevent further injury. Steven landed first, on all fours, and shifted back to human form, glaring up at him. Blood dripped from the through and through wound a hair above his collarbone.

"What the fuck! Did you shoot me?" Steven tried to stand but toppled backward instead.

Cristian squatted next to him. "No. The neighbor behind us has a hard-on for killing big cats. He's probably coming all over himself right now, thinking he finally got one." He grabbed Steven's bicep and wrapped an arm around his back. "Let's get you inside. You might also want to consider making clothes on yourself. If this jerk comes over, I don't want to have to come up with an excuse for having a naked man on my roof."

Steven formed jeans and footwear. "And he'll believe a man was on your roof?"

"When he finds out he shot someone and I threaten to call the cops to report his ass, he'll believe me. Besides, I'm hoping the tree shadows camouflaged you."

"The man shot without a good sight? Idiot."

"I wouldn't throw stones if I were you. You're the one who shifted and climbed up there without knowing 'the lay of the land,' so to speak."

Jeremy hurried out with a towel compress, then braced Steven on the other side. Lupe, her wide gaze focused on the shadows, held the door open for them. She didn't back away until they were safely inside. Then she locked the door and seated the dead bolt.

"All the draperies are closed. Windows and doors locked." She perched on the edge of the coffee table.

"Let's take a look."

"Let's not." Steven slapped his hand over the compress.

Cristian leveled a no-bullshit stare at the man. “If you're trying to hide your enhanced healing abilities, or lack thereof, don't bother. The mystery's long over. Lupe's bite to Frieda's ass answered all.” It had taken a long time to heal.

“Well, you know what they say”—Steven shrugged his good shoulder—“bite wounds are the worse.” Blood seeped into the light blue towel beneath his white-knuckled grip. Shock paled his suntanned features.

“Care to tell us why you were spying on us?” Jeremy held out a second towel.

Steven stared at it for a few seconds, then accepted it. “I wasn't spying. I wanted to make sure you were safe. I don't exactly trust certain members of my clan after the incident today. Your people have the estate guarded, so I wasn't worried about them breaking into the lab and ransacking the place. But the three of you...” He lifted the bloodied towel for a peek, winced, put it aside, and pressed the clean one over the wound.

“So your plan was to sleep on the roof all night?”

“I jumped up to do a quick scan while the three of you were *occupied*,” he snapped. “I thought you'd be too busy to notice I was here.”

“A mountain lion ate someone's Chihuahua a couple of months ago. Neighbors have been lying in wait for the cat ever since. I understand before that, it was coyotes,” Cristian said. “I'm surprised someone's not over here to claim victory and have your head mounted on their wall. Which probably means whoever did it realized they'd shot a person and are scared shitless the police are going to lock them up.”

“No police,” Steven muttered.

“The police will get involved the minute someone reports the shot. They'll call paramedics—”

“No doctor.”

Jeremy leaned in close. Steven had no choice but to look at him. “What would you like us to do with your body when you bleed to death? Do you think your people will honestly believe we didn't do it?”

Cristian slipped his hand over Steven's uninjured shoulder. “You came here tonight to protect us. Trust us enough now to help you.”

Steven closed his eyes on a sigh. Weariness poured off him. He sagged a little, then opened his eyes and peeled off the compress. The bullet had torn through the thick muscle along the top of his shoulder but looked like it missed bone. Cristian probed it gently. The blood flow wouldn't allow him a clear view.

"You need medical care. You know the institute has its own medical facility. Let us take you there." He pressed yet another towel Jeremy gave him over the wound.

"No." Steven shook his head. The movement took effort; he grew weaker by the second. "Too many questions. No answers to give."

Lupe touched his knees, drawing his attention. "You'll die if you don't get help."

"I know." He struggled to stand. Jeremy's hand on his other shoulder held him easily in the chair. "Please," he said. "Help me get to my car. I'll put a glamour over the wound long enough to get home."

"And who's going to help you there?" Cristian added pressure to the wound, wincing when Steven did. "I believe Frieda would kill you just to say we did it."

Steven actually smiled. "She would. No doubt about that. But there are those who are on my side. Her numbers are few; they just happen to be the loudest. She's grown increasingly irrational the last several months. If I can get home, there will be someone to help me."

"And if you can't?" Lupe asked.

He tried another smile that didn't work. "Maybe I'll get killed in a car accident, and that'll take care of all other questions."

"And risk killing an innocent person?" Jeremy's voice was one level below shouting.

Steven pinched the bridge of his nose. "Sorry. Desperation talking."

"I'll take you home." Cristian didn't know what else to suggest.

"I don't think he'll make it, Cristian," Jeremy said.

"His glow is dimming." Lupe rested her palms on Steven's knees and looked up at Cristian. "Help him heal." Tears caught on her lower lashes, looking like tiny diamonds.

The answer was simple and yet far-fetched. What else did they have to lose? Steven was fading while they stood there and debated, so far out of it, the chances of his remembering anything were slim. Cristian hoped.

He strode into position behind the man, sprung a claw, and held it over his wrist.

Jeremy grabbed his arm. *"What are you doing?"*

"Trying to save his life by giving him my blood. If it heals me, it might heal him."

Logic and emotion warred in Jeremy's expression. *"Try it on me first."*

"What are you going to do? Slice open a vein and hope I can seal it?"

"Isn't that what you're getting ready to do to yourself? We don't know for certain if what you experienced earlier was a fluke or the real deal."

"We're out of options, Jeremy. He sure as hell won't make it back to his place, not at the rate he's fading. We could wait until he passes out and take him to the institute facility, at which point, all hell will break loose because he won't make it there either. I can't let him die, not if there's a chance I can save him."

"It could be a trap to out you."

Cristian hadn't considered that. They already knew Frieda's faction wasn't above using dirty tricks and force to get what they wanted, but would Steven be willing to sacrifice his life? Maybe he didn't know that's what he was doing. Maybe he was another pawn in Frieda's rebellion. One fact remained: Cristian couldn't let the man die. Lupe trusted what she sensed in Steven, and Cristian trusted Lupe.

"How's he doing?" he asked her.

She flicked her gaze up. More diamond tears fell. "Fading in and out but aware."

"Too aware," Steven mumbled. "I can remember the days when a wound like this was nothing more annoying than a splinter."

"Ah yes, the vagaries of age." Cristian traced his claw over his vein.

"I'd laugh if I had the energy." Steven struggled to stand again. Lupe refused to budge. Petite though she was, she was enough of an obstacle to keep him in place.

"I have to try."

Jeremy nodded. *"I'll lift the compress when you're ready."*

There wasn't much sense in trying to distract Steven. It'd only waste time and bring attention to what Cristian was doing. He pierced his vein. A single drop of blood appeared before the wound closed, entrapping his claw. Cristian pulled it free.

"I guess that answers one question. Be ready."

Jeremy gently nudged Steven's hand away from the compress. "Let me see how it's doing."

Cristian held his arm over the wound. The instant Jeremy peeled the towel back, he ripped his claw up his arm. Dark red drops—thick and flecked with gold shimmers—plopped into the gaping hole. The slice in Cristian's arm zipped closed. The only hint he'd been cut at all was the residue on his claw.

Steven gasped. "What the fuck did—"

No one moved or spoke. They watched as a lacy web of skin, muscle, and shimmering blood spread out and burrowed into the exit wound. Five minutes later, there was no sign Steven had ever been shot. His skin tone returned to the sun-rich glow.

"What did you do?"

Cristian jerked back. Jeremy's wide eyes matched Lupe's. Steven hadn't verbalized the words.

You've created a monster. Cristian damned the voice in his head. *Only you can destroy it.* Pain stabbed his temple. He covered his eyes against the blinding white light. His knees buckled, and he felt himself fall. Jeremy caught him before he hit the floor. Steven jumped up to help ease him down. Then Lupe's worried face swam into view.

"What happened?" Steven asked. "What did he do? What *is* he?"

Skinwalker, another voice hissed out. Skin...walker.

The void opened. Cristian leaped for it. It spun away from him in a swirling vortex of gold and indigo, taunting him with information it wanted him to have but refused to yield. Damn it, he'd chase it if he had to.

"Don't leave us." Lupe's voice pierced his rage and frustration. The weight of her body warmed him, her fingers feathering over his chest and face. Her hair tickled his skin; then he felt her cheek pressed against his chest.

Cristian pulled in a deep breath and slipped his fingers into her hair, holding the lifeline she'd tossed his way. *"I won't, little one. I won't."* Then he turned his mindspeak to Jeremy and didn't give a damn if Steven heard. *"Remember your promise."*

Steven's "What the fuck?" drowned out any response Jeremy gave.

* * * *

Jeremy wondered if his heartbeat would ever return to normal. Cristian lay on the sofa, an ice compress over his forehead, Lupe by his side. Steven had retreated to the bathroom. Jeremy felt sick inside and more than a little stupid.

What good was having Mensa-level intelligence if he couldn't use it when he needed it most? Remember his promise? He wished to hell he could forget it, or at least pretend he didn't have a clue what Cristian meant. Instead he racked his brain, trying to remember everything he'd ever read about the skinwalkers. Nothing came.

It wasn't necessary to ask Cristian if the pain in his head had subsided. Jeremy felt the edges of it stabbing through Cristian's skull, and with it frustration and fear. "I think I'd better check on Steven."

"I'm not going anywhere." Cristian patted his stomach.

"I'm not a cat, you know," Lupe told him. Still, she crawled on top of him and settled with a sigh.

"I know," he muttered and idly combed his fingers through her hair.

Jeremy envied him the comfort. If it weren't for Steven, he'd be pulling them both into the bedroom for the night. Hell, for the week! Or maybe he'd carry them far away from all this crap and drama. He had money he'd never touched. They'd manage quite nicely on it. Someplace isolated enough they could run wild and free when the need arose. He huffed a sad laugh. The rest of the clan would never allow it. Safety in numbers and all that. The implants in every jaguar's head made it easy to find each member. The clan had them inserted shortly after they'd realized they'd lost track of Carmen. He wondered if he and Lupe would be pressured to have one now.

Lupe lifted her head as he turned to walk away. "He smells different."

Jeremy's heart skipped a beat. "Cristian?"

"Steven," she replied. "Not bad, just different."

"I'll keep that in mind." If the son of a bitch could take the appearance of another and make it seem like he was wearing clothes that weren't really there, he could fake injury. That didn't explain all the blood, though. Where were those bloodied towels? Jeremy hadn't seen them since he'd left to make the ice pack for Cristian. A quick analysis of the blood could fill in a lot of gaps

about the mountain lions. Steven wouldn't have risked it. He'd probably hidden the towels under his fake clothing.

That might explain his smelling different. Lupe's nose missed little. The rest of them had been too led astray by the constant flood of pheromones. Maybe it was time to do a little sniff test of his own.

Steven stood in front of the bathroom mirror, poking his shoulder for signs of injury. He frowned at his reflection and flexed his shoulder.

"Still primping, I see." Jeremy leaned against the doorjamb.

Steven glared Jeremy's way. "What the hell did you people do to me?"

"Saved your life?"

"And I get the feeling it was against your wishes, judging from your reactions."

"Yes."

Steven let loose a halfhearted chuckle. "There are some revelations best left thought and unspoken. At least I know where your loyalties lie."

"You're an idiot if you didn't already realize that."

"You saved my life, but at what cost?" He brushed his fingers over his shoulder.

"At great cost to Cristian, but I doubt that matters to you. I didn't want him to do it. Cristian couldn't let you die. Then Lupe started in on how good you smell..." He strolled up to Steven's side and sniffed him up, smiling when the hairs on Steven's arm lifted on goose bumps. "Hmm...not bad. Guess it's a woman thing."

"Back away." Steven leaned to one side. "I don't trust you this close."

"And I don't trust you at all." Jeremy gave him the distance he'd requested.

"Good, then you'll understand why I'm taking these." He lifted a white plastic bag from the toilet lid. The blood-soaked towels showed through.

Jeremy braced his shoulder against the wall, barring Steven's only exit. "He saved your life, and now you're stealing his towels?"

"My blood, my towels."

Which more or less verified what they already knew—the mountain lions fiercely guarded any and all biological information about themselves. "Other than our sweat, you won't find

anything about us you don't already know, if that's why you're taking them,” Jeremy countered, even though he suspected differently.

Steven snorted. “Oh I'd say there's a lot about you people we don't know. Cristian can heal. Lupe isn't truly a calico cat. And you're one of *them*.” Another snort. “All this time, I thought you were their mascot. Though in hindsight, that's ridiculous, since they do have humans working for them. At least I presumed everyone's human. Full disclosure was part of the treaty, but then...we all withheld things.”

Was he pointing fingers or admitting his clan hadn't been forthcoming?

“Maybe you were always a jaguar and just kept it a secret.” He made direct eye contact for the first time that night. *“Like you kept something else a secret.”*

Jeremy wouldn't deny the obvious. *“And how many secrets have you been keeping?”*

Steven's mouth twisted. The hint of a fang peeked between his lips. Jeremy replied by extending his claws.

“What else have you changed about me?” Steven asked.

“How do I know, when I know nothing about you? As for the mindspeak, you could have had the ability all along and are just pissed that the veil's lifted and we can hear each other. Trust me; it's just as much a detriment to my clan as it is to yours.”

“There's that word again...trust.” Steven pulled his control in, settling his beast.

Jeremy stayed ready. Steven's clothing was an illusion; he could shift at the blink of an eye. Jeremy wouldn't be caught defenseless. He prayed he had enough control to shift his hands and leave the rest human.

“I came here tonight to ensure your safety—”

Jeremy burst out with a feigned laugh. “You came here tonight to spy on us. I'm still trying to decide if the gunshot was a planned diversion or some trigger-happy neighbor. Either way, you're leaving with your life and an apparently new ability.”

“And you'd better hope I don't leave here with anything else.” A snarl underlined Steven's words.

“As far as I'm concerned, it's too much. If you even hint to another soul that Cristian has the ability to heal—”

"You'll kill me?" Steven snickered.

"Without hesitation. You're lucky I'm letting you walk out the door."

"Brave talk for someone who was human twenty-four hours ago. Makes me question how new a shifter you really are." He flicked out a claw and aimed it at Jeremy's chest. Jeremy blocked him, a move so fast, it shocked them both.

A slow smile covered Steven's surprise. *"And there's the proof."*

"Wouldn't you do anything to protect someone you loved? Amazing how strong that makes a person...or a shifter. I doubt you'd understand."

Anger swept over Steven's face. "You smart-assed son of a bitch." He lengthened his claws and showed fang.

Jeremy matched him and then some.

"Stop it. Both of you," Cristian hissed out from the hallway. "You can compare whose is bigger later. The police are here and headed up the walk. Hide those." He jerked his hand toward the towels and walked away. The doorbell rang a second later.

Jeremy sheathed his claws. "You might want to think twice before you conjure up any of your woo-woo mojo glamour and reproduce that wound."

"I'm suspicious, angry, and I don't trust any of you in any way, shape, or form, but I'm not stupid," Steven replied. "I have as much at stake as the rest of you. Perhaps even more." He shoved the bag under the sink cabinet, then motioned Jeremy to precede him. Jeremy took a step into the hallway and waved Steven forward.

"Fair enough." Steven tilted a nod and walked on.

"We're responding to a nine-one-one call of shots fired in the neighborhood," Jeremy heard the officer say. Both Hispanic males stood outside the door and tried to look beyond Cristian to see inside.

"We didn't call," Cristian replied.

"Call came from a prepaid cell phone and gave this vicinity. We're doing a safety check of the area. Mind if we come in?"

"We're good, Cristian," Jeremy told him.

"Not at all." Cristian pushed the door open.

The men entered without hesitation, gazes sweeping the scene. Lupe watched them from the perch of her chair, twirling a strand of hair around and around her finger.

"We noticed what appears to be blood on your grass," the first officer said. "Spots on your porch." His partner studied the carpet and found nothing to suggest an injured person had come inside.

"I don't know what to tell you." Cristian turned his palms up. "We were busy and not paying much attention to anything else."

"Busy?" The second officer lifted an eyebrow.

"Yes." Lupe flicked her hair over her chin. "Busy." A sensuous smile filled in any gaps the police might be having. Those pheromones of hers peppered the air, and he couldn't help wondering if she'd activated them on purpose to distract the cops.

"Could be someone was shooting at a mountain lion," Cristian told him. "With all the sightings since the fires last year, people are scared and do stupid things. The street and yard lights can only do so much. Shadows from the trees and bushes make great hiding places, and I swear there's times I worry some neighbors will shoot at anything that moves. They've done it before. We try to stay in."

"Smart idea. Wish others were as cautious."

"People are people." Cristian shrugged and subtly maneuvered the policemen back toward the door.

The officers followed his lead. Being alpha had its benefits. "We're going to be canvassing the area for a while. Call if you see or hear anything. We won't be far."

Cristian nodded. "Excellent."

Then they were out the door and gone. Footsteps tapped down the sidewalk, paused, then continued across the street.

"This time of night, I doubt they'll take much more effort." Cristian cracked his neck. "Our light drew them here. I don't see any houses lit up across the street."

"Good. The sooner they leave, the sooner I can get the hell out of here." Steven started for the bathroom.

"You're not leaving with those towels," Cristian called out.

Steven jerked around. His cat rippled just below the surface of his skin. Jeremy peeled off his shirt and unzipped his jeans. If there was going to be a fight, he was damn well going to be ready.

“Rein in it, gentlemen.” Cristian took a stance between them. “There are cops right outside. They’ll shoot first and ask questions later, especially if they see a jaguar and a mountain lion going at it in my living room. Then where will we all be?”

Lupe slipped her hand into Jeremy’s and tugged him into the chair with her. For someone so little, she was very strong.

Cristian pulled in a breath. “They’ve seen you, Steven. What do you think they’ll do if they find you walking out with a plastic bag of bloody towels? I suppose you could take on the appearance of someone else. That still won’t keep you out of jail, and the towels will go into evidence. Besides, if I want a sample of your blood, I can go outside and get it off the grass. Still not convinced? Then park your ass on the couch for the night.”

Steven tried to stare down his nose at Cristian. Their equal heights made that impossible. “And how the hell would I explain that to my people?”

“You swore you were going to be up our asses 24-7; here’s your chance.”

Steven scrubbed a hand down his face.

“You were going to lie in wait on the roof all night. What’s the difference? Except comfort. You and I both know how close you hovered to death. If I’d wanted you dead, you’d be dead. One of us has to start trusting the other at some point.”

“*I* trusted.” He splayed his fingers against his chest.

Cristian stabbed a finger his way. “You *lied*. That treaty wasn’t worth the paper it was printed on. Admit it, you withheld as much from us as we withheld from you. Maybe even more.”

Steven’s eyes flared gold, then dimmed to his normal green with his shrug. “What can I say? Our hoped-for collaboration was doomed from the start.”

“Those loud voices again?” Cristian asked.

“Something like that.” A beat of silence echoed through the room. No revelations filled it. “I think I’ll be taking my chances with the police.” Steven whipped around and strode toward the bathroom.

The biggest shock wasn’t that Cristían let him go, but that Cristían did an opposite turn toward the kitchen and marched into the adjoining garage. The next noise was the sprinklers kicking on. The men met in the middle of the living room, two cats a whisker away from a full-on shifter face-off.

“My show of trust.” Cristían jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Clearly, saving your life wasn’t enough. The sprinklers are washing away your blood as we stand here.”

“Thanks. Someday I’ll return the favor...but not tonight.” He sidestepped Cristían and headed for the patio door.

Jeremy leaped from the chair and snagged his bicep. “Cristían risked everything to save you.”

Steven’s eyes turned cold. “Then Cristían is a fool.” He jerked free and walked toward the door.

“You ungrateful bastard!” Jeremy charged after the other man. A snarling mountain lion whirled around in his place.

Cristían jumped between them, lethal paws fully formed and armed. “Yes, a fool. By saving your life, I not only revealed my clan’s secret but also my own. If you betray me now, you also betray yourself. How do you think your people will feel when they realize you can mindspeak with us, and they can’t?”

The air shimmered as Steven shifted back into human form. He looked beaten, weary...sad. He grabbed the bag from where it had fallen and clutched his fist around it. “All right. I’ll trust you enough not to kill me in my sleep.”

“Cat Scouts’ honor.” Jeremy flicked him off.

Steven didn’t spare him a glance. “Any other surprises I can anticipate? Am I going to wake up in the morning and find a black jaguar staring back at me in the mirror?”

“It’d be an improvement over your looks,” Cristían told him. “I’ll get you a pillow and blanket. Try not to shed on my upholstery.”

“And leave behind potential DNA?” he replied.

“Silly me. What was I thinking?”

Jeremy trailed after Cristian to the linen closet. “You can't be serious, letting him stay here.”

“Considering what he knows about me, it's the best choice. It's the best choice for him too. His paranoid friends would kill him before he got the chance to explain his new ability.” He pulled a pillow from the top shelf and handed it to Jeremy. “And don't lecture me about having 'saved his life.' The phrases 'skinwalker,' 'you created a monster,' and 'kill them all now' run an ever-increasing circuit in my head. I'm second-guessing myself enough as it is, wondering what I might have created. I don't need you doing it too.”

Guilt burrowed into Jeremy's conscience. He cupped Cristian's shoulder and gave him a little shake. “You are *not* a skinwalker.”

Cristian tucked the blanket under his arm and shut the closet. “Are you certain? Because that place beyond that we went to is telling me differently.”

Jeremy couldn't answer, couldn't lie.

“Yeah...me either.” Cristian slipped the pillow from his fingers and walked away.

Chapter Thirteen

Lupe eased from the bed. Sleep was impossible tonight. Tension put the men on edge. Jeremy hadn't bothered trying to sleep with her and Cristian in the too-small bed. He'd sequestered himself in the second bedroom to work on the computers. Cristian had tossed and turned, any dreams he had apparently laced with agony. Clearly the handful of pills he'd taken earlier did nothing to cut the pain. She thought of kissing his cheek before she left but didn't want to disturb what little sleep he was managing to get.

On tiptoe, she slipped from the bedroom and peeked in on Jeremy. He slept too, his head on the desk, a small screwdriver clutched in his hand. Sleeping but hardly relaxed. She saw his eyes dart back and forth beneath the lids, telling her his sleep was troubled and not deep. His forehead was not smooth but rather crinkled with whatever problem worked through his subconscious in his sleep. Like Cristian, he was nude and ready to shift at a moment's notice. Lupe understood the need to be prepared to fight and defend, but how they could stand the cold without fur or clothing mystified her. With bedcovers and Cristian next to her, Lupe still needed thick socks and his sweatshirt to get her to that cozy temperature she loved. Between the two items, only her knees showed. She could live with that, and she loved the extra comfort of sleeping in his clothes.

Again she resisted the need to care for Jeremy. Clearly her trying to coax him into a bed or a more comfortable chair would disturb him. He was asleep, and that's all that mattered. She left him alone and wandered into the living room.

Steven's breaths were too deep and even. She almost called him on feigning sleep but decided it wasn't worth the effort. Any confrontation, no matter how subtle, would only stir the other two. They needed what rest they could get. Steven lay on top of the blanket, nude as well. Streetlights filtering in highlighted the golden hue of his skin and the blond hairs dusting it. Bodywise, he was Cristian's double, his muscles honed from a lifetime cut from nature and

circumstance. Lupe couldn't help admiring him. She was a woman, after all. But though she appreciated his physique, the spark of fire she felt with Cristian and Jeremy didn't exist with him. Steven was merely something pretty to look at. He was also apparently well aware Lupe was looking. The long cock nesting in the golden thatch at his pubis filled and lifted.

I knew he wasn't asleep. Ah...the power.

She thought of blasting an extra something his way, like she'd done to the police officers earlier, but it would have been showing off. Instead she unlatched the patio door and stepped into the cool night. The smells of home surrounded her—crisp green grass, spicy roses, delicate gardenias, California pepper trees, eucalyptus trees, and the mix of what everyone had cooked for dinner. She'd missed this but hadn't realized how much until now.

She doubted they'd stay at the small house long. Joaquin was concerned for their safety and wanted them in a secure location. Cristian agreed, although she could tell the decision weighed heavy on him. A female didn't live with a man for six months and not recognize his moods. She wondered if he feared his clan would discover he was changed as well, and how long he'd be able to keep that a secret.

Lupe inhaled more of the night air. She and Cristian hadn't been here for a couple of months. They'd been staying at the Prentice estate with Jeremy while the men worked on their experiments in the basement lab. Though Lupe loved the roaming space, the grotto, and the garden, there was comfort and security being here. This had been her neighborhood the last several years. She knew every nook and cranny, every rock and tree, many of the neighbors, and most of the four-legged denizens.

Now *there* was a source of good information. Little got past cats and dogs. One of them would know who had shot at Steven tonight. They knew everything. Odd that she hadn't heard Sport barking, *Intruder alert*. The shaggy mongrel was always the first line of defense against strangers. But then, barking was what brought little ChiChi to the mountain lion's attention. One gulp and the dog was gone. Four-leggeds weren't stupid. Well...most four-leggeds. Lupe'd met a few over the years that were a waste of fur. ChiChi fell into the category.

She walked to the edge of the patio, then squatted next to the grass. Water drops clung to each blade of grass, glistening from the multitude of streetlights and yard security systems sprinkled throughout the area. Lupe brushed her fingers over the tops and watched the water

trickle down. Would the grass still feel springy beneath her toes? Mute her steps as she hunted for prey?

Lupe laughed at herself. Her days of defeating rodents, birds, and crickets were over. The skills would live on forever, though. As for feeling the grass beneath her bare toes, that required removing her socks. Cold and wet? No, thank you.

Movement flashed in the corner of her eye. She slowly turned her head toward the pyracantha bushes defining Cristian's patio. Pale blue eyes stared at her from the depths. Lupe turned in that direction and moved closer.

"Mittens?"

The black-and-white cat crawled backward into the shadows. A low growl warned Lupe to keep her distance.

"It's me"—she held her hand out—"Lupe."

Claws scored furrows over Lupe's palm. She sucked in a breath at the pain and watched the cat bolt off. Behind Lupe, the patio door opened. *Cristian*.

"There you are." The door clicked shut.

"Sniff me out?" She clutched her hand to her stomach to hide the injury.

"I did." He squatted next to her, engulfing her with his warmth, his smell, his arms. He'd slipped on the matching pants to the sweatshirt she wore. "I've been sleeping with you for the last six months. Did you think I wouldn't realize you left the bed?"

"You weren't exactly sleeping."

"More like thrashing? Sorry. Bad dreams, I suppose."

"And even worse pain?"

"It comes and goes." He pulled her hand into his and opened her fingers. "Friend of yours?"

She managed a sad laugh. "Used to be. Mittens didn't recognize me. I frightened her and should have known better. She's not overly fond of strangers."

"I can't say I blame her." He kissed the scratches. "She hurt more than your hand."

Yes, the rejection hurt. Lupe wouldn't deny that. But she'd known from the start she couldn't live in both worlds. She'd made her choice. "I knew there would be sacrifices with the

rewards. I know I have a lot to learn, but it feels like every second that ticks away, I get further away from what I was and nearer to what I want to be.”

“Then you're already wiser than most people.”

He licked the point of his tongue over one scratch. Tingles shot up her arm. Then again over the next, following it to the end of her thumb, around, and down the other side. Her nipples tightened, and that spot between her legs swelled. Moisture seeped into her silky panties. Her breath caught on the last swipe, a slow draw over the gouge that ended in a deep swirl in the center of her palm. A clear promise of the pleasure he could deliver to her clit.

“There...all better.” He circled his thumb over her wrist.

Lupe glanced down and saw the wound was gone. *Cristían's magic.*

“Come...sit with me.”

He cupped her elbow and molded his fingers against her ribs. They stood as one. She pressed her palm to his chest and rolled it over his pebbled nipple. His strong, steady heartbeat raced with hers. Nose pressed to the well of his throat, she inhaled his musk. She twirled her tongue into the shallow depression. Cristían's gasp speared pleasure through her. She crawled her lips lower, licking the salt from his skin. Her thumb grazed his nipple, flicking over and around. His hips rolled his erection over her stomach with each circle. Lupe blew against his nipple when she reached it, then suckled the bead into her mouth. Cristían groaned and clutched her head against him. Her body tightened, pumping more juices into her already-sodden panties. She certainly wasn't cold anymore; anything but. She aimed for his other nipple.

Gasping, Cristían captured her wrist and pulled her arm around his neck. His other hand anchored her to him. The heat of his breath sent surprising chills coursing down her spine. Hot lips nipped at hers until she whimpered with the need to feel his tongue inside her mouth, inside...everywhere.

The earth moved beneath her toes. Lupe nearly laughed at her imagination; then she realized Cristían walked them backward to one of the lounge chairs. He sank down and pulled her astride him, his big hand kneading her buttocks into place over his erection. A chill curled up her back when he dived under the sweatshirt. Her hard nipples thrust into the fabric and were rewarded with the kiss of his thumb. A tiny moan rippled from her throat, and his tongue plundered her mouth.

The words *thoroughly kissed*, heard so many times while watching TV, now meant something. Around and around he danced, missing nothing. Lupe couldn't keep up. She sagged into Cristian, writhing into his palm, rubbing his rigid cock, letting him thrust his tongue around her mouth until she couldn't think, much less breathe.

The breeze rustled the overhanging tree. Cristian broke the kiss and rocked her back, one hand ripping her panties away. Lupe gasped at the chill on her crotch, then groaned when Cristian's thumb rolled over her clit.

"Tug my sweatpants down. Release me." The command whispered over her.

She was so lost in a cocoon of bliss, it took a few seconds for the words to sink in. Once they did, she hooked the waistband and yanked the garment down. His erection sprang free. The head smeared moisture over her thigh. Lupe knelt up, grabbed the thick flesh in a tight grip, and speared it into her body.

Cristian smacked his head against the chair and groaned. "Don't move." Fingers nailed her hips in place. "You are so tight, so hot. It feels like your muscles are crawling over my dick."

She nestled her face against his neck. "Isn't that a good thing?" Oh how she wished she could purr those words.

"Love, it's a marvelous thing." He arched his neck to her lips. "But you have me so *damn* close to coming, I can't think straight."

"You mean I could finish you just by doing this?" She clenched her vaginal muscles.

Cristian grunted and tightened his hold. "Damn, woman."

Woman, not *little one*, and she felt it down to her bones. Lifting her head, she cupped his face. Movement in the house caught her eye. Someone enjoyed the scene.

"Would it help your stamina to know we were being watched?" she asked with a grin.

"Jeremy?" His cock pulsed more heat.

"Steven." She brought her lips to a whisper away from his. "Stroking himself as he watches. I can see the moisture gleaming at the tip."

One corner of his mouth lifted in a wicked grin. "Hell with him. A real cat wouldn't watch in the shadows. A real cat would try to join, if only to watch up close. Ride me, sweetheart." He slid his thumb to her slippery clit.

Lupe closed her eyes, shutting out Steven's image. This moment was theirs, no one else's—except Jeremy, should he decide to join them. *A real man, a born jaguar.* A moan rumbled up from her belly at the thought. Cristian grew harder, hotter...bigger. Lupe locked on, letting the pressure build until she knew they'd both explode if one of them didn't move.

Sucking in a breath, she lifted her pelvis until only the head remained lodged inside her, and mourned the loss of him throbbing inside. A hard plunge seated him deep once more, bowing them together. How long could they stay just like this? Forever was too short a time. She moved again, shallower this time, faster. His thumb rolled with the thrust. Sweet ripples spread outward from the spot, tightening her around him.

He traced the folds around her clit, drawing more juices to the peak. Something clicked inside her. Lupe stopped worrying about technique and let instinct take over. Lost in the wonder of his touch, she writhed on his cock, loving the feel of it nudging deep inside, the sensation of being filled to bursting.

Cristian yanked the sweatshirt up. Her nipples hardened all the more in the cool air. Shivers rattled through her. She stabbed her fingers through his hair and shoved his face against her breast. He sucked the nipple deep, kneading with his lips so hard, she felt it in her clit. Lupe rocked into him. Fingers spanned her hip, urging her to go faster...faster.

"Don't hold back," she cried out. "Give it to me."

Cristian growled and pounded into her body. The lounge's legs slammed into the flagstone patio, moving them closer and closer to the house with every thrust. She clamped her thighs around him and held on. Orgasm burst upward, carrying him with her. He snapped his head up on a growl. Lupe opened her eyes, marveling how glorious he looked, half-wide with his jaw clenched and teeth bared. She felt it too. Breathed it. Lived it.

"I love you, Cristian. I love you so much."

She feathered her fingers over his face, down his neck and shoulders. Cristian grabbed her face and kissed her through the after-tremors. A sigh settled them into a hug. The coppery scent of blood on Lupe's fingers chased the warmth away.

Lupe pulled her head up and saw blood trickling down Cristian's neck. "You're bleeding."

Cristian scrunched his chin in to try to see. The motion increased the flow, and it wiggled over his collarbone. He swiped the edge that crawled toward his chest. "What the—"

“Are you hurt? Why isn't it healing?” She followed the line upward with her fingers and found the source—a sharp object poking from his head. “Cristían!”

He cringed from the touch. Though he muffled his groan, Lupe still felt his pain. Cristían patted the back of his head himself, then yanked his hand away.

“Maybe it's more glass.” She jumped from his lap. “Let's go in. Jeremy can get it out.” Lupe was too afraid to try. She didn't want to cause more damage. Her tactile skills weren't the best at the moment. With time, she hoped those would improve.

Cristían swung his legs over the side of the chair, then pushed to his feet. He swayed and fumbled for a handhold. The chair clattered to the patio. He stumbled, then clutched his head and doubled over. Lupe jumped up to catch him, but it was Steven who made it to him first. An arm around Cristían's shoulder, he helped him inside.

Lupe shouted for Jeremy. He burst into the room as she knelt on the chair arm beside Cristían. The splotch darkened his brown hair to black. “I think it's more glass from the accident.”

“I'll get a pair of needle-nose pliers.” Jeremy darted for the garage.

Steven parted Cristían's hair away from the wound. “It's not glass.”

No, it wasn't. Lupe had never seen anything like this in a human. Something...electronic.

Frowning, Steven probed it.

Cristían groaned and clutched his head. “Stop...the pain.”

“What the fuck *are* you people?” Steven edged away.

Images of creatures popping out of Cristían's head raced through Lupe's head. She'd seen it happen on TV, things that devoured everything and everybody, complete destruction. “Don't worry, Cristían. I'll kill anything that crawls out of you.”

Jeremy patted her shoulder, alerting her that he'd returned. “Everyone needs to calm down. It's his tracking implant.”

Not a monster. Relief made her knees quake. She remembered hearing about those.

Steven gave Jeremy more room to work. “What the hell is that thing for?”

“A GPS tracker, so the clan always knows where their people are. Like the microchips people put in their pets.”

“Get it out,” Cristian grunted out. “Hurry. The pain...the voices—” Dark fur sprouted over his arms. Claws tipped his fingers.

“Hang in there, buddy. It's clearly malfunctioning. I don't have the right tools to do a careful extraction. We need to get you to Joaquin and Carmen.”

“Not like this. Not safe. The voices.” He growled, half-cat, half-man. “Call them.”

“I got it. Just hang in there.” Jeremy grabbed the cordless and punched in the number with one hand. The other grounded Cristian...she hoped.

* * * *

Tension and fear coiled in Lupe's stomach. She didn't like feeling helpless, and there wasn't a thing she could do to help Cristian. Her presence didn't soothe him, didn't calm the jaguar fighting for release.

He lay curled in a ball on the floor, clutching his head. He refused Jeremy's and Steven's efforts to ease the pain, wanted them out of swiping distance should he lose control. Both paced nearby, nude and ready to defend against and protect Cristian from himself. Steven hadn't even bothered with the illusion of clothing, and here Lupe couldn't even manage to sprout a whisker to lend in aid. She sat in a chair, legs tucked beneath her, watching Cristian writhe with pain and frustration, and tried to send waves of comfort his way. All she managed to do was stir up more of those damn pheromones and agonize all the men.

She leaped to her feet at the first sound of Joaquin's truck pulling into the driveway and had the front door open before the man exited the vehicle. Fluid strides carried him up the walkway. He clutched a heavy aluminum medical case in his white-knuckled grip. Lupe could hear his heart racing, feel the anxiety bunch his muscles.

Joaquin darted through the open door, eyes widening when he saw Steven there. He shot a quick gaze to the others, and she knew it was to assess possible threat.

“He's neither friend nor foe,” Lupe told him.

Joaquin spared her a single nod and hurried on to Cristian's side.

Jeremy skidded to his knees beside them to help Joaquin. Lupe returned to her nest in the chair. Steven hovered near the patio door, muscles locked in preparation for escape. Why he remained...

Lupe answered that question for herself. He wanted to know exactly what this was. So far, he'd been sensitive enough to the situation not to ask for more information.

"I have no idea why the chip's causing pain." Joaquin snapped the med-kit open.

"He took a hard blow to the head during the accident. Could be it broke or went deeper than just below the skin," Jeremy replied. "Or both."

"Strong possibilities. This shot will ease the shifter in him and reduce the pain." Joaquin slapped a syringe in Jeremy's hand. Jeremy ripped open an alcohol swab, swiped it over Cristian's ass, and stabbed the syringe into the muscle. Cristian grunted. Seconds later, the jaguar traits subsided. Relief rippled through the room.

"Thank you." Cristian sighed and sagged into the carpet. "The pain...the voices..."

Joaquin parted Cristian's hair. "Hold your breath. This might hurt. I can give you a shot of lidocaine..."

"No, it can't hurt any worse than it does. Just get it out," he said in a rush of breath and buried his face in his folded arms.

Joaquin grabbed the tiny electronic chip with forceps and eased it free. The wound sealed instantly.

"Well...that's an interesting development." He dropped the chip into a vial of clear liquid. The fluid turned pink with Cristian's blood. "Care to enlighten me?"

No one spoke.

"I see. I suppose no one wants to explain what *he's* doing here either." He jerked his chin Steven's way.

"Long story." Cristian tested his head and sat up against the chair.

When Lupe feathered her fingers through his hair, he rested against her knee. Now that the pain was gone, the lines in his face had smoothed.

"I see." Joaquin swished the device clean, then retrieved it and clicked it into a small black box. Red numbers scrolled over the screen. "It's your tracking chip, all right." A frown made his lips droop as his gaze swept over the data. "Hmph...interesting." He turned the box Cristian's way. "Someone's figured out a way to transmit data to it."

Jeremy slipped it from his hand. His fingers flew over the small keys.

"It wasn't us," Steven quickly replied. "We didn't know about the things."

Cristian glanced up. "How can you be positive? You didn't know about Frieda's little takeover attempt. You sure as hell didn't know about the C-4. What else are they hiding? Did you even know I was sleeping with Frieda?"

Lupe wanted to yank a fistful of his hair for mentioning the bitch. She'd resented Frieda's intrusion from the start, even though she knew the motive behind Cristian's attraction. She also wasn't thrilled when he began a friendship with Jeremy. She had recalled Jeremy from his association with Trina and had little use for the spoiled jerk. All that changed when she met him again. *He'd* changed. Light glowed around him where it hadn't before, and his smell! Now...here they were. Together. Frieda was history. She no longer mattered. Lupe shoved the annoyance to the back of her mind.

"Yeah, I knew," Steven muttered.

Joaquin repacked the medical kit. "You mentioned voices. What kinds of voices? What were they saying?"

Cristian pulled in a breath and looked up. "Calling me a skinwalker. Telling me I'd created a monster. Urging me to kill, kill them all."

Joaquin paled. His breathing increased. When he reached out to take the electronic device from Jeremy, Lupe noticed the slight tremor in his hand. He nestled the device into its foam bed and snapped the kit closed.

"Didn't you destroy the last skinwalker a year ago?" The mind question came from Steven. He was so new to the ability, he probably didn't realize he hadn't spoken aloud. Though Lupe understood the communication, she still didn't possess that skill. Considering the slow lift of Joaquin's chin and the wide-eyed glare he sent toward all the men, she was very grateful for that lack.

"There's an explanation," Cristian told him.

Joaquin lifted his hand. "I'm sure under the circumstances, you can see the need to place all of you in medical lockdown for evaluation. Immediately. You know the protocol as well as I do. This isn't an option. You can go willingly or..."

Or he'd have them taken by force. Fear lifted the hairs on Lupe's arms. Images of cages and helpless animals crying day after day choked her. How could Joaquin be threatening to do something so horrid to his own people?

Cristian draped his arm over her leg. The show of protection calmed her but did little to ease her fears. "We'll go willingly. The sooner we get this resolved—"

"All of you." Joaquin's gaze darted to Steven. Steven merely nodded...once.

"We'll follow you in my car," Cristian said. "I'm presuming you're not comfortable with us in the same vehicle as you."

Joaquin wrapped his fingers around the med-kit's handle. "Not until I'm certain you are *you*."

"I understand completely." Cristian brushed his fingers over Lupe's leg, petting her, calming himself. Finally she had a purpose in this whole crazy incident.

"I'll be waiting in my truck. I won't leave until you do." Joaquin walked out with none of the purpose and vigor that had brought him inside.

"What does this mean? What's going to happen?" Her voice quivered. *Please don't separate us*. She'd die if she couldn't touch Cristian and Jeremy.

"It means I should have been honest with the clan from the start about this new ability of mine," Cristian said. "Everything now casts too many suspicions."

Jeremy pulled in a breath and looked at Steven. "You can still run. Take your bags and dash out the back."

Steven sank to the edge of the sofa and stared at the carpet. "Over the last couple of hours, it seems I've lost the ability to give myself clothing," he said without looking up. "I've got nowhere to go. There's only so much I can hide from my people. Once they find out I'm different..." He shook his head.

"Can you still shift into your cat form?" Cristian asked.

Steven closed his eyes. His mountain lion form replaced his human form in less time than it took to think about it. Then he moved back into human form. "That's still good."

For now went unsaid, but they were all thinking it.

"You know my people will analyze the blood on the towels," Cristian told him.

“Maybe it's for the best.” Steven slumped and rubbed his eyes.

“I'm sure Cristían has something here you can wear. You look pretty close to the same size.” Jeremy hurried toward the bedrooms.

“I'm sorry, Steven. I was only trying to save your life. I truly had no idea...” It broke Lupe's heart to hear Cristían so sad.

“Maybe they'll understand and be grateful you're still with them,” Lupe suggested.

“Maybe they will.” Steven's shoulders shook with his sigh.

“If not, you'll have a home with my clan,” Cristían said.

Steven glanced up. “But will you?”

Chapter Fourteen

Cristian wrapped his hand around Lupe's calf. She was his link to sanity, and he held on for dear life. Someone had been fucking with his head all this time. None of his visions had been true. He knew he should be grateful for that, but it still didn't explain why he'd physically changed or how he could have changed Steven.

Unless that's illusion too.

Cristian formed a claw and raked it down his arm. It healed instantly.

"Do you all have that ability?" Steven asked.

The question was inevitable. Cristian was surprised it'd taken him this long to ask. "We all heal quickly, but not this quickly. You couldn't speak thoughts to each other before?"

"No, we couldn't. We relied on instinct and body language to guide us while in cat form. But...it wasn't always like that."

"Here you go." Jeremy returned with a pair of Cristian's jeans, old sneakers, and a Lakers sweatshirt that had seen better days. "This should do for now."

Steven muttered his thanks and started to dress.

"You were saying?" Cristian prompted.

"The hantavirus swept through the community where we lived. Humans began to die," Steven said, zipping up the jeans. "We were fine and thought we'd show good faith and do the people a service by hunting and eating the rats that carried the disease. We didn't realize eating them would affect us. Doing so never affected any other wildlife, so we thought we were safe." He pulled the sweatshirt over his head and finger-combed his hair into place. "We weren't. The virus mutated and altered us, taking away one skill and giving us others. Our numbers had been diminished by encroaching civilization. Attempts to live with humans and help them..." He shielded his eyes too late to hide the sheen of tears. "After that, we isolated ourselves and tried to stay away from everyone."

“That's why you don't want anyone touching your blood.” Jeremy sank onto the sofa beside him.

“Exactly.” Emotions in control, Steven dropped his hand and bent to put the sneakers on. “We don't want to contaminate others.”

Dread weighted Cristian's stomach. He'd had unprotected sex with Frieda, unprotected sex with Lupe.

“I see the horror in your eyes,” Steven told him.

Cristian met his gaze. “It's not your fault. I'm the one to blame. I'm the one who—”

“It seems the risk is not to you,” Steven interrupted. “When my people infiltrated your clan, we discovered by accident that our species are not compatible. Sex with your kind alters us yet again, and not in a good way. It causes madness, enhances our feral nature, and we become wilder. At first we couldn't be sure. Anger and suspicion run high in our clan, as you know.” Steven inhaled, then blew it out. “Frieda decided to test the theory for herself. Mate with one of you and see the results. Many of us were dead set against it. As before, certain people acted on their own against clan advice. She's started to exhibit those signs.” He looked around at the others. “So have some others she's mated with. Whatever you're giving our people, it's transmitted sexually. Some have abstained from sex out of fear. Others... Well, you've noted the division for yourselves.”

Cristian *had* created a monster, one growing and spreading and out of control. “And yet you took my blood.”

“Pain, blood loss, shock.” Steven gave a halfhearted shrug. “I wasn't capable of stopping you, and I didn't realize that was your intent until after the fact. And now it seems...” He waved a hand down his body.

Jeremy twisted around and braced against the sofa arm, the look on his face incredulous. “You're saying Cristian healed you of the virus?”

“All I know is that I'm back to the way my people originally were.” He pointed to the plastic bags near the patio door. “The answer might be there. That's *me* the way I was before.” He pointed to himself. “This is *me* now. Lab results will provide more information. And we all know your lab is far superior to anything we have.”

Lupe's cool fingers curled over Cristian's neck. “You think Cristian can save your people.”

Steven nodded. "After this change in me, that's my hope. Getting my people to accept the cure might wind up being a battle all its own, though. The results of your recent secret experiments haven't sat well. They could view this as another attempt to kill us. If I continue to change and wind up looking like one of you, it will be war. They won't stop until they've bled you all dry."

And no one would be suspicious, since the mountain lions could take any form. Except, apparently, Steven.

"I need to get dressed." Cristian hopped to his feet and hurried to the bedroom.

More confusion battled in his head. He sank to the bed and buried his head in his hands. Voices had told him he'd created a monster, and only he could stop it. Those same voices had told him skinwalkers were here, and he needed to kill them all. He didn't know what was real and what was false. Was this the insanity Frieda suffered? The virus had mutated and infected him? Yet Steven sat there. Another illusion? They could take any form. Every event tonight had fallen into such neat little slots. Was it wrong to suspect a trap?

Hell, they could be saying the same thing about us. They *were* thinking the same thing. Why else plan a coup of the estate lab? Now Cristian's own clan had doubts about him, Jeremy, and Lupe. What would they find once they started running tests? He wasn't sure he wanted to find out.

Skinwalker. He'd given his blood to another man and presumably changed him into something else. Not the true method of a skinwalker, but how could he know he wasn't a step below, a hybrid, a mutant?

"Cristian?"

He glanced up to see Jeremy standing in the doorway.

"You're letting misplaced guilt eat at you." Jeremy sat down on the bed next to him. They both leaned forward and stared at the floor.

"Those voices—"

"Transmitted into your mind by the microchip."

Cristian snorted. "Do you realize how unbelievable that sounds?"

Jeremy twisted his way. “Do you realize how unbelievable all of this is?” He spread his arms. “Look at us.”

“I know, but come on, Jer. It's a GPS microchip. It's more conceivable that it was damaged when I hit the floor. Let's not even consider the *who* or *how* of it; the better question would be *why*. Why target me? We all have the chips.”

“All right, it was damaged, and the voices you're hearing are from the Akashic Field, for lack of a better description. I get that. I'm getting some sort of insight too. But only when the three of us come at the same time.”

“I can't make sense of it, Jer.” And maybe that's what was driving him so crazy. “Everything's muddled.”

“No surprise there.” Jeremy rubbed his hand down Cristian's back. “We're exhausted. Every time we turn around, it's something different. We need some fucking sleep.”

“Well, we're not going to get it anytime soon. Once we hit the medical lab, there will be one test after the other. If Joaquin finds anything suspicious...” Cristian didn't want to think about it, much less say it out loud. “Maybe we should run. Steven's Jeep can't be far. We'll throw what we can in a duffel bag...”

“If that's what you want, I have a lot of money set aside that could see us through for the rest of...”

Cristian looked his way. Jeremy's mouth had dropped open with the realization of just how long the rest of his life was going to be now.

“Yes, that's a very long time.” Cristian had seen more than a few centuries pass.

Jeremy straightened. “A very long time to live with true guilt too. From what I know of your people, they've never run from anything. They've always made a stand and faced things head-on. Hell, you might be able to save Steven's people. Do you want to turn your back on that, to remember a hundred or a thousand years from now that *you* might have had the ability to save their species, but you never tried? I gotta tell you, Cristian, up until this last year, I did turn my back on everybody. It was all about me. It's an awful way to live.”

Cristian let out a long sigh. “This last year has been the best of my life. I've spent most of it with you and Lupe, trying to help find a better something for everyone. If you want to run, then

I'll go with you, because I know I can't live without the two of you. But I can tell you from experience that the guilt of running could very well pull us apart and leave us with nothing."

Jeremy's logic and insight cleared the fog from Cristian's head. He was right, down to the last word. Cristian didn't have all the answers, but he did know he had to be true to himself. Whatever he might physically be, his heart and soul were the same.

"We need a more firm plan before we leave here." He smacked his thighs and pushed to his feet. "Let's see if we can convince Joaquin to come back inside and hear us out."

* * * *

Joaquin nursed a bottle of beer. He'd agreed to listen, with the provision that Jeremy and Steven also accept a shot to suppress shifting. Neither cared. At that point Steven was too shell-shocked to refuse, and Jeremy was too locked on to investigating the mystery of everything to care if he could shift. Cristian was surprised Joaquin didn't demand Lupe get a shot as well. He was either trusting that she couldn't shift, or was of the opinion her shifting was little threat to him. The shots wouldn't prevent them from shifting, merely delay it long enough for Joaquin to leave safely. He'd have little to fear from a small calico cat.

Cristian kept laughter at his speculation to himself. Lupe as a cat was *tough*. She could sink those claws and teeth deep and make an adversary think a tiger rode him. Human Lupe would be no different. She had the heart of a warrior. Even now she eyed Joaquin from her chair—her *throne*, they'd jokingly called it—rarely blinking, body tensed if Joaquin dared threaten the men she loved. Her devotion and loyalty did things to Cristian he hadn't felt in centuries. Squeezed his heart so hard, he felt it in his balls.

Silence dragged on. Joaquin sat astride a dining-room chair he'd dragged into the living room, resting his arms over the back, using it as a shield between him and them. Cristian resented the dominant display but didn't argue. Instead he'd sat on the coffee table. Not as dominant, but enough to show Joaquin he wouldn't be screwed with. As rankings went within the jaguar clan, Joaquin might be higher, but Cristian would be as alpha as he or Wyatt. Jeremy sat on the edge of the sofa to Cristian's right. Steven had yet to move from the other end, other than to speak.

Cristian had had enough of the silent treatment. They were wasting time. "Say something."

“Like what?” Joaquin smacked the half-empty bottle on the end table. “You expect me to believe everything you say? Why should I, when you didn't reveal it after the accident? I can't even come up with a plausible reason *why* you withheld the information in the first place.”

“Fear? Stupidity? The fact there were two mountain lion shifters there at the time?”

“There's one here now!” He flicked his hand at Steven. “You had ample opportunity when Carmen and I were here earlier to tell us about these voices...visions... Whatever!”

Cristían's patience was wearing thin. “Put yourself in my shoes, Joaquin. If you had those voices in your head, you would have done the same.”

“It's not possible that chip could be transmitting mind-altering signals to you,” he countered.

“Why not?” Jeremy asked.

Joaquin slid a glare his way. They all knew the answer—it would mean someone knew about the chip and had the means and technology to hack into it. If Cristían's chip was compromised, all the chips could be. Complete takeover. Body and mind. A new form of skinwalker. Only one group had motive for doing so, and one of their members was sitting here. If Cristían hadn't seen Steven healed, he wouldn't have believed it. Maybe Steven wasn't. Maybe that was a ruse too. Who knew what secrets they kept, what secrets they'd kill for? Cristían couldn't even mindspeak with Joaquin now; Steven would hear. Maybe they could all along.

They were a species able to take any form. Why was Cristían so willing to believe he'd been able to heal Steven? He had no pride to salvage, no ego to assuage, only the instinct compelling him to save the man. *You are responsible, only you can stop it.* Those words, ones he'd remember for the rest of his life, held new meaning now. He *was* partially responsible for the latest mutation in the mountain lions, and it appeared he might be the only one to stop it.

“Is it still transmitting?” Jeremy asked.

“Yes, it was the last time I checked.” Joaquin nodded.

Jeremy pressed his palms together, a plea to Joaquin. “Then let me evaluate it. I helped design the thing. I can tell if it's a malfunction or a real threat.”

“I'm not handing over technology to you, when I can't be sure who the hell you really are,” Joaquin calmly replied.

"You'll know soon enough," Jeremy replied and flopped back into the cushion. "You've got my DNA and blood work on file. A quick comparison will—"

"You know damn well there's little quick about it," Joaquin snapped.

"You'll know enough." Cristian heard the tightness in Jeremy's voice, knew he pushed the words out through clenched teeth. "Unless you plan to keep the four of us locked up until a full workup comes back."

Lupe's eyes flared wider. Her breathing increased. Cristian surged to his feet. Joaquin leaped up, toppling his chair.

"Calm down." Cristian said the words to Joaquin, but they were meant for Lupe. He stood behind her, leaned over her chair, and pressed his fingers against her neck. He made some slow circles against her nape. It always seemed to ease her fears as a cat. He hoped it worked now, when she was a human as well.

Joaquin righted the chair and resumed his position. "Fine," he said, looking at Jeremy. "We can get preliminary results on you and Cristian. But what about them?" He jerked his head to Steven and flicked his hand at Lupe. "We have nothing to compare."

Steven nudged the plastic bag at his foot. "This verifies the virus. I have no idea what my blood will show now. If you need further data, I can access our records through your computer and give you everything you need."

Risky, letting "one of them" near their computers. But damn it, someone had to start trusting somewhere, and there should be enough firewalls and security to protect their system. It still didn't explain how his GPS chip had been hacked...*if* it was hacked.

"Fair enough for now. And her?" Joaquin looked over Lupe's head to Cristian. "I presume she has a cat toy somewhere."

Cristian felt her bristle and the hairs lift on the back of her neck.

"I am a warrior. I do *not* play with toys."

He regretted he couldn't see the cold disdain leveled Joaquin's way. Jeremy's smirk told him it was pure ice queen.

"My apologies, lady cat." Respect glinted from Joaquin's eyes. He'd paid her quite an honor with the title.

Lupe's muscles relaxed. Cristian brushed his hands over her shoulders. "I'm sure I'll be able to find a brush with her DNA on it," he assured Joaquin.

"Very well. Once we have preliminary findings, I'll authorize you to analyze the chip," Joaquin said, looking at Jeremy. "At the institute's lab and nowhere else," he added. Joaquin slid his gaze to Cristian. "Any other revelations? I'd really like to get moving. It's already been a long night, with an even-longer day ahead."

"None." Cristian straightened, momentarily hovering over the other man. "I'll walk you out."

Joaquin swung his leg back as he stood, muscles flexed with the move, his own boast of power. "Always a pleasure to have your company."

They headed to the door in tandem, then walked outside. The breeze had shifted, bringing with it the heavy scent of mountain lion. They were being watched. It didn't speak well of Steven's motivation.

"Odd that they've chosen now to show up," Joaquin said.

Apparently he trusted the mindspeak enough here to use it. Or maybe he didn't care if they were overheard. Cristian wasn't sure how to respond. *"Neighbor behind me saw a black bear earlier. Called the cops."* He waited for a whiff of fear to follow. Nothing. Bears were one of a big cat's biggest fears. Had the mountain lions been eavesdropping, one of them would have reacted.

"Clever." Joaquin clicked the truck door open with his key fob. *"Steven might be telling the truth after all."*

"And me?"

Joaquin climbed behind the wheel. *"Still trying to decide. You look the same, smell the same...but we've been fooled before."*

"Not fooled, just not observant. We put down the lack of mindspeak to trauma and never questioned it otherwise. We didn't know the mountain lion clan existed until then."

"And now we do." Joaquin put the kit on the floor, then stabbed his key into the ignition. *"And one of them is in your house with that ability right now."*

"A monster I created?" Cristian already knew that's what Joaquin thought.

The other man had the nerve to shrug. *“Or you are.”* The engine roared to life. *“You escorted me out here for a reason...”*

“You need to verify everyone's chip is operational.”

“So you can hack them?”

Cristían slammed the door shut in his face. The sound echoed through the neighborhood like a gunshot. Lupe burst from the house. Jeremy hooked her elbow and hauled her to safety behind him as he came out as well. Cristían fought the shimmer indicating an imminent shift and peppered Joaquin with every disgusting word he could think of, in every language, some current, some obscure, most extinct.

He turned on his heel and marched toward the only two people he could trust. “Pack our things!” He shouted in a voice no one would have any trouble hearing. “We're leaving. They can all die for all I care. All of you!” The three of them would start their own line. Screw the others.

Lupe tossed her arms around his waist and burrowed her head against his chest, stopping him in his tracks. “You don't mean that, Cristían. You know you don't mean that. You do care. It's one of the reasons I love you so much. You *do* care.”

He clutched her to him and squeezed his eyes shut against the emotions swirling around him—fear, anger, hurt...now love and comfort to usurp them all. Strong fingers curled over his shoulder; then Jeremy pressed his forehead to Cristían's. He soaked in the comfort and made plans. He had money too. They'd find a place on a secure mountaintop, where the sun was always warm and rain enriched the land.

Other fingers touched his back. “I'm sorry,” Joaquin said softly. “I had to be sure. I didn't want to make another mistake. The last one nearly destroyed us all.”

Cristían turned his head but refused to look at his lifelong friend. “And are you sure now?”

“No...just less doubtful. Few would know most of the words you hurled my way. Some of them I'd forgotten.”

So had Cristían, until rage yanked them from memory.

“Come with me to the institute. At least you'll be safe and comfortable at the medical facility there.”

Geared specifically for their species. If only the mountain lions had told them about their illness in the first place... He was back to that—saving them. Lupe and Jeremy knew him so much better than Cristían knew himself.

“I love you both,” he whispered.

Jeremy's hold tightened. “I love you too, my friend...my best friend. You've helped me realize the good person I can be. You've helped me shed that hateful, selfish person I used to be. You make me want to be a better person. You make me want to be like you—the type of man who still believes in something more, even when there might seem like there's no hope left. I'm with you, no matter what you decide.”

Lupe looked up. “I will never leave you. Never.”

Cristían brushed his fingers over her cheek. “And I will defeat anyone who tries to take either of you from me.” He kissed her forehead, tucked her head under his chin, then drew Jeremy to them in a group hug he ended far too soon.

His gaze fell to Steven, hovering inside the door. “Your people are watching the house.”

“I know.” Steven smirked. “You really didn't think *I* was stupid enough to come here without subsequent backup, did you?”

“Fair enough,” he admitted with grudging respect. “They need to know you're coming with us willingly.” Cristían considered telling him to do whatever it took to convince them, that he would kill any of them who tried to harm Steven. But that would only put the mountain lion clan on the offensive, defeating what he and the others hoped to accomplish—saving their lives.

“Done.” Steven strode forward and brushed by them. For the first time, Cristían was seeing the real alpha in him. Steven addressed the shadows. “All is well. I'm going with them to the Braden Institute willingly. Just follow me and wait.” He'd spoken softly, but in a voice those sensitive ears could easily hear. Steven waited a few more seconds, then returned to Cristían and the others. He still clutched the plastic bag of bloodied towels in his hand. No telling what his clansmen thought of that.

“We're almost ready,” Cristían told Joaquin. “You will not, at any time, separate the three of us. Do whatever it takes to see we are together at all times. If we aren't”—this time, he had no problem issuing threats—“then I will tear the place apart to get to them. Trust me; I now possess the power to do so.” And they could all do what they wanted with that snippet of information.

Chapter Fifteen

Lupe stood stock-still in front of the wall-size aquarium. Only her eyes tracked the lazy paths of multicolored fish swimming to and fro amid the bubbles shooting toward the surface. Every color of fish she could imagine was in the tank and in a variety of sizes, most of which could be demolished in one bite. It'd be worth getting her paw—her *hand*—wet to snag one. If only she could discover how to get to the opening. Mrs. Wallace had had a smaller version. Too fearful of drowning to go near it, she'd skirted the edges of the small dining room to avoid the thing. All that had changed. She was braver now, more daring. Would this place really miss a couple of tiny fish? She was starving. Coffee and bagels were not what she'd call a good breakfast. She wanted meat!

Instead she, Cristían, and Jeremy had been led with their meager rations to this room and told to wait. They'd passed no one on the way, hadn't seen or heard anyone in the thirty minutes they'd been here. The place felt like one of those cages Lupe hated. Amusing herself with the fish was the only way to keep the panic away. The hunger pangs weren't so easily appeased, despite a bite of raisin bagel. She left the disgusting food to the men, along with their coffee.

The least Joaquin could have done was find me cat treats.

Lupe chuffed at the annoyance and waited, poised for another fish to come nearer. Her pulse fluttered with the rush of the hunt. A yellow one dared. Lupe whipped her fingers up and tapped the glass. The fish and all those close to it shot away. Lupe shrieked with laughter...and did it again. This was the most excitement she'd had since they'd arrived at the Braden Science Institute's medical facility.

Deep chuckles drifted from the waiting room sofa behind her. "I really don't think they like when you do that," Jeremy said.

The institute or the fish? It didn't matter. "I don't care." She aimed for another grouping, laughing when they scattered. "I've been poked and prodded, drained of every fluid my body

possesses, stuffed into noisy tubes that shattered my eardrums, had things attached to me, been forced to drink foul liquids—”

“No one forced you, love,” Cristian said. “You refused.”

And her men had backed her up. “I had to take a stand.” She crept to a school of fish on the other end of the tank. “That person put his fingers in me. I didn't care for it at all. It certainly didn't feel as good as when you do it. In fact, it didn't feel good at all.” She slapped her palm against the glass and giggled when the fish fled.

“It didn't feel good when he did it to us either,” Jeremy said.

“Really?” She craned her neck his way. “But you became hard.”

“A physical reaction we can't help,” Cristian replied. “Our penises have minds of their own.”

That pulled her around. “Really? They...think?”

“Only about you,” he said, and they laughed.

“Come”—Jeremy reached out, caught her fingers, and pulled her to him—“sit with us, and you'll see for yourself.”

Smiling, Lupe nestled onto his lap. Cristian pulled her feet up to his thighs and slipped off her shoes. She wiggled her toes at the freedom. Of all the things she had to wear in this form, shoes were the most reviled.

Jeremy's erection nudged her rear. She danced her toes along the ridge swelling Cristian's tan pants. She was sorry now she'd been allowed to dress in her own clothes. The flimsy blue smock thing she'd worn for the multitude of tests would have come in handy, leaving her open and available to their wandering fingers. She'd love to feel their hands on her skin. Inside, too, to help erase the memory of that man's probing.

Cristian massaged her toes one by one, then kneaded her arches and ankles until Lupe felt like purring. Jeremy cradled her head on his hard chest. His heart beat strong and steady. Oh to be curled naked with them in that big bed they'd been given. She'd been too drained after the myriad of exams to take full advantage of it. They'd eaten dinner—blood-rare steak with her favored asparagus—then showered and fallen into bed, Lupe tucked safe and warm between them. Morning came too soon with that cold breakfast she didn't care for and Joaquin's instructions to go to this private waiting area for their test results.

At least Joaquin had kept his word. The three of them hadn't been separated once, though after a couple of hours of medical tests, Lupe longed for Joaquin to do so, if only for the pleasure of her seeing Cristian tear the place apart. They'd seen little of Steven during this process. Occasionally their paths crossed, and he looked like he was no worse for the experience than they were. A part of her hated the thought of his being isolated and alone. Lupe had a feeling Steven was used to being on the outside. It didn't make her feel better, though.

"It's sad to know Steven has not had relations in over a year," she said.

Cristian's fingers froze. Jeremy pulled back to stare down his nose at her.

Lupe wiggled upright, tucking her toes under Cristian's thigh. "I can't imagine a year without physical contact. No one to snuggle with. No one to pet you. No one to sleep with."

Jeremy dropped his hand to her hip. "There's nothing to say he hasn't had those things."

She slid into the narrow space between them on the small leather sofa. Each had to turn to accommodate her. "He hasn't. I can tell. He's so lonely. So sad. So...burdened."

"We are *not* inviting him into our bed." Cristian sliced his hand through the air, a clear signal he wanted the discussion over. Normally the commanding gesture filled her with pride and more than a bit of awe. Today...

"I can't see what it would hurt."

"It would hurt me," Jeremy quietly replied. "It would hurt my heart."

The admission made her feel all squishy inside. The reason was good enough for her. She resumed her former position, sitting on Jeremy's lap with her feet on Cristian. Content, she sighed.

"I wonder what's keeping Joaquin?" Cristian worked his way up her calves. "He's normally never late."

"I can think of something to pass the time." Jeremy jerked his head toward the adjoining door.

Cristian grinned. "I like that idea."

"What idea is that?" she asked.

Both men slid their hands to her crotch. Pleasure shot through her. But... "Joaquin said to wait here."

"I don't care," they replied. They were doing that a lot lately. *One mind, one voice.*

"After all he's put us through the last twenty-four hours, he can wait for us," Cristian added.

Lupe liked that attitude.

"Unless you're not interested," Jeremy said.

"Oh...I'm interested." A delightful thought tickled inside. Could they? "I've seen some interesting mating positions while watching TV with Mrs. Wallace."

"Animal Planet does have interesting programs." Jeremy gave a little laugh. "Each time I watch something, I think about how much it would blow their minds to discover shape-shifters exist."

Lupe clucked her tongue and nudged his shoulder. "Not animals mating—humans."

Cristian's fingers stopped their ascent. "Porn? You watched porn...uhm...people having sex on TV?"

"Oh yes, it was Mrs. Wallace's favorite. Afterward, or sometimes during, she would—"

"That's okay," Jeremy interrupted. "We get the idea."

"Oh good...then I won't have to explain much." She knelt in the narrow space between them. "Maybe we could try one of those positions?"

"Any you'd like." Jeremy waved his hand toward the exit. "Lead the way. We'll let you have your way with us."

Cristian grinned. "If you're done deviling the fish."

"For now." Lupe slipped her feet into her shoes, grabbed their hands, and pulled them with her. She half expected Joaquin to choose that moment to arrive and held her breath all the way down the corridor to their private room. They passed no one and heard nothing. Finally Cristian shut and locked the door behind them. They were all hers.

"Undress for me." She raked her nails over their backs and let the words whisper through them. Jeremy shivered. Cristian's muscles rippled. Pressure built between her thighs.

Lupe kicked her shoes to the side and wiggled onto the edge of the bed to admire them. She couldn't count the number of times she'd watched them strip over the months, curled up on the center of the bed, wishing herself to be human. Now...

She licked her lips, earning a groan from one of them. They were perfect monuments to mankind—Cristían, solid and muscular; Jeremy, more slender but still well defined. Her gaze wandered down the stair steps of their torsos. She paused at their navels, those dark wells that marked the beginning of the trail to full cocks staring right back at her. Both were thrust skyward, their tips glistening with fluid.

Lupe slid to her feet and undressed, tossing her clothes to the corners of the room. She watched their brown eyes glaze over as they watched her. The urge to tease them was too much to resist. She cupped her breasts and brushed her thumbs over her hard nipples, flicking back and forth, back and forth.

Cristían flexed his fingers at his sides. She knew he wanted to take control, or at least stroke his cock. Jeremy clenched his fist against his stomach, closer to succumbing to the urge to fist himself. Lupe so wanted to push them over the edge. She crawled backward on the bed and lifted her heels to the edge. Their gazes were riveted to her crotch. She opened her knees as far apart as possible and slowly parted her nether lips with her fingers until the ripe flesh at the top stood alone.

“You want to taste it, don't you?” she whispered.

A guttural *yes* came from them.

She pushed one finger inside and drew out her juices. “It was quite pleasant to have Cristían's fingers inside me *here*.” She pointed to the tight hole below. Cristían smacked his fist against his thigh. Jeremy raked his fingers at the hair around his cock.

“When *that man* thrust into me yesterday, he used something to ease the way. I recalled something similar on those shows. I thought perhaps we might try that position.”

Lupe smelled the rush of pheromones. *Good*.

Cristían cleared his throat. “It's not as easy as it looks, my queen,” he rasped out.

She *loved* the endearment. It made her feel powerful and worldly.

“You are physically a small woman. We are big men. I doubt there's a man in the universe bigger than Jeremy. Doing what you want might hurt you.”

Oh but she could see he wanted it badly. His erection had swelled to impossible proportions, deep red and pulsing, and still he—they—held back for her. How could she love them any more than she already did?

“Oh, Cristian, you and Jeremy would never hurt me.”

“You make me want to fall to my knees and worship you.” The words came out a near snarl. Cristian grabbed his cock and gave it one stroke, squeezing the fluid from the tip until it dripped to the floor. Her brain screeched to a temporary halt.

“Like I worship you?” she managed to say.

“More,” Jeremy said on a half groan.

“Then that's a lot,” she whispered, moving farther onto the bed. “I don't think I have the patience for seduction.”

“That makes three of us.” Cristian closed the distance between them.

“Lubricant, Cristian,” Jeremy cautioned from behind him.

Oh how she wished she could mindspeak with them! At least she could understand them when they did. It was better than nothing.

Cristian pressed his fists into the mattress. “I'll find some. Give me a moment.”

“I could give you relief now, if it will ease you.” Lupe traced her finger along the underside of his cock. Fluid kissed her at the tip. She brought it to her lips and sucked it off.

The mattress dipped with Cristian's weight. He crawled to her on his knees, pushing her back with each inch he gained.

Lupe grinned and feathered her fingers up his thighs. “Would it help if I told you I took the liberty of slipping one of those tubes of lubricant into my smock pocket?”

“Where is it?” The question came out rough, like he could barely speak.

Lupe glanced toward the small bag containing her clothes. Jeremy reached it in two strides. She swore his erection reached it in one. He dug through the bag, found the lubricant, and tossed it Cristian's way. Cristian caught it with one hand.

Jeremy rolled onto the bed, pulling her on top of him. His cock smeared moisture over her belly. When he grabbed her hips, she knew he was going to slam into her. She guessed wrong.

He urged her upward, a gleam lighting his eyes, until her crotch reached his mouth. Lupe whimpered when his tongue darted out. It looped around her clit like he had all day. She dug her fingers into his hair, determined to put his face right where she wanted. Then cool fingers against

her rear startled a gasp out of her. Cristian gave her no further warning before he sank beyond the tight muscle.

Lupe tossed her head back on a hard moan and grappled for a handhold. Finally she smacked her palms on the wall and tried to ride them both. But her men were the experts, she the mere novice. Jeremy twirled his tongue around, teasing her orgasm up, only to move at the damndest time. Cristian pumped his fingers into her ass slow, then fast, soft, then hard, rolling, widening.

She braced one hand against the wall and reached for her breast. Cristian beat her to it, pinching and tugging her nipple until she swore that alone could make her come. Spasms clenched her thighs around Jeremy's face and gripped Cristian's fingers. She rolled toward climax, praying this was no tease, begging...*begging* them to... "Please, oh please."

And then she was coming. So sweetly, all Lupe could do was feel and let it sweep her away.

Hands spread over her hand, guiding her down. She felt the nudge of Jeremy's cock and sank onto him. Her muscles tightened around him and drew her pleasure out and up once more. Trying to catch her breath, she lay with her cheek pressed to his chest. More cool slickness bathed her back hole; then Cristian's warm thighs pressed against the backs of hers. He probed his fingers deeper, and—*oh my!*—it felt so much different with Jeremy's cock spreading her wide. Her clit swelled to attention. She rocked, trying to find the friction she needed.

"Easy, love," they whispered.

"Let Cristian do this." Jeremy kissed her, teasing her lips and tongue the way he'd teased her clit.

She tensed when she felt Cristian's cock nudge her entrance. Jeremy deepened the kiss. Cristian feathered his fingers down her spine, over her hip, again and again...petting her. She eased by slow degrees, tensing again when he slid a little farther inside. She dug her nails into Jeremy's shoulders. Instinct had her pushing against Cristian. He grunted a protest. Her whimper fell into a moan when his fingers found her clit. And then he breached the barrier. Cristian circled her clit, chasing the pain away instantly. She was coming quicker than she'd ever imagined. The feeling pooled deep inside and rushed outward.

Cristian jerked his hand upward, tangling his fingers into her curls. She would have screamed a protest if Jeremy's mouth weren't clamped to hers. Instead all Lupe could do was fall into the kiss and the feeling holding her climax hostage below.

Cristian moved first, drawing out slowly and easing back. Jeremy's groan rumbled into her throat. His hold on her back tightened. Cristian hauled in great huffs of air. Heat rose between her. Safe...secure...loved. She wished...she wished...

"I love you. I love you both so much."

She felt them both jerk, then heard their voices *inside her head* when they replied, *"I love you too."*

Lupe wanted to weep with joy. She wished, and it was so. Twice. Would a third time hurt? *"I wish to have your babies. I wish it. Make it so."*

Their control burst. Jeremy broke the kiss on a gasp for air. She watched his jaw clench, felt Cristian grip one hip, cried out in wonder when he pinched her nether lips closed over her clit. And then they moved, slow at first, each taking his turn. Then faster and deeper, together and separately.

The sky opened, dark purple as far as Lupe could see, with sparkles of gold that promised to rain down and bless them all. They soared into it as one.

Chapter Sixteen

They were down to this—the big information dump. Cristian had expected it to be in the more formal setting of the conference room. Instead the black leather club chairs in Joaquin's office were set up in a circle, everyone equal, nothing between them but a small round table where bottles of water sat untouched and steam curled up from a few burgundy coffee mugs.

Wyatt had joined them this morning. He looked no more rested than Joaquin. Their auras emitted *tired*, among others, like *irritated*. Neither commented on the fact that Cristian, Lupe, and Jeremy were an hour late. The men had noses and would know what the three of them been doing, even with their having showered.

Cristian and Jeremy helped themselves to cups of coffee from the pot on the credenza. Lupe took a generous mug of half-and-half for herself. Only Steven glanced up when they sat down. Cristian couldn't tell if that was hope or despair he saw in his eyes.

The most notable absence was Barry. He was always present whenever there was anything going on that remotely affected the clan. Now there wasn't even an extra chair to indicate he'd be joining them. Cristian tried to figure out if there was a hidden message here somewhere, and wondered if Barry's absence had anything to do with Steven's presence. Three high-profile members of their clan and one very important support person were in this room. Did they really want to add another and give away Barry's role?

Cristian tossed that idea aside. The mountain lions already knew Barry's role. He'd negotiated that worthless treaty. So where was he? Working behind the scenes on something else, something bigger? His pulse rate increased, drawing Joaquin's attention. The man's eyebrow lifted a hair. Cristian ordered himself to calm.

“Now that we're all here...” Joaquin pulled a folder to his lap. The clasp inside held a small sheaf of papers. Other folders tucked by his side were thicker. Cristian presumed those were individual files on each of their medical tests.

“As agreed, we're going to share everything we've gleaned from the tests.” Joaquin placed his palm on top of the folder. “Any preference on where you'd like to start?” He glanced at each of them, finally settling on Cristian.

Now *that* was a look he had no trouble interpreting. Joaquin wanted Cristian to take the lead, direct the questioning and flow of information. He was giving Cristian control, the alpha position.

“Have you been able to investigate and collect data from the accident site?” It was as good a starting point as any; after all, it was the point from which this all began. Cristian had given Joaquin the code for the cipher lock when they arrived at the institute. Then he and Jeremy had reluctantly turned over the hard drives from their laptops.

“A joint team from the clans began work immediately and are under close scrutiny.” Joaquin crossed one leg over the other. The folder had yet to be opened. He most likely had everything inside memorized. “There's no reason why Jeremy's experiment should have gotten out of control the way it did. Something new was introduced that provided a catalyst. The resultant explosion commingled with your experiment using Rose's DNA. It also may have commingled that DNA with yours, Jeremy's, Lupe's, and Barry's.”

“Barry?” Jeremy leaned forward, his forehead a washboard of furrows. Just as quickly, he eased back. “Oh...Lupe scratched the hell out of him. Paper towels had his blood on them.”

“The team is still shifting through the data and analyzing it. Once we get more thorough DNA results back on the three of you, they'll be able to determine how that mix might have affected you...if it did at all.”

“It did affect us,” Cristian said. “We've all been changed.” Steven too, as a result.

“Yes. There's little doubt Jeremy is one of us. DNA will show more, but he couldn't be more one of us than if he'd been born to the clan.” He lifted his palm. “Before anyone starts spouting theories that we're creating shifters in the lab, it's important to realize that few of us know all the aspects of our DNA. It could very well be that Jeremy had the shifter gene in his historical family DNA. His experience and close proximity to us this last year could have triggered his change.”

It made sense. Nice and logical. Perfect and safe. “So you're satisfied Jeremy is still Jeremy.”

“We are. Once this meeting is over, we'll give Jeremy your tracking chip to begin his analysis.”

“Does the rest of our clan know there's a potential breach in the tracking chip?” Jeremy asked.

“No, we didn't want to alarm them without just cause. If there is a breach, Wyatt and I also decided that deactivating the chips might alert whoever's responsible. Only those of us in this room know about it. The GPS chip has not left my possession.”

Wyatt rubbed his eyes, his first action of any kind since they'd walked into the room. And in that moment, Cristian knew Wyatt wasn't tired from being at the lab all night. He'd spent the time hiding the women and children at the safe house, and setting up personal guards. That explained Barry's absence—he'd be guarding the families. It was the logical course of action—protect the future of the clan. It had to be killing Wyatt and Joaquin that they couldn't be with their wives, children, and soon-to-be-born. Cristian would have been half out of his mind with worry if he were in their place.

Joaquin reached for his coffee mug. His gaze flashed to Lupe, so quick, anyone not looking at him would have missed it. On the surface Joaquin was letting Cristian lead the discussion; however, he clearly wanted Cristian to ask about Lupe next. The reason for the subterfuge, if that's what it was, Cristian couldn't guess. But he covered Joaquin's subtle prompt just in case.

“Love...” He tapped his upper lip. “You have a little cream here.”

Lupe flushed red—*that's new*—and licked it off, then set her empty mug on the small table.

“What did you learn from Lupe's tests?” Cristian asked.

“We're still evaluating the data and would like to run a few more tests.”

“No.” Lupe's tone invited no discussion. “I have my babies to think about.”

Joaquin's eyebrows shot up. “Babies?”

“Yes.” She placed her hand over her stomach. “I'm having babies. Two babies. One is Cristian's and one is Jeremy's. We've mated many times, and their seeds are deep within me, waiting to be.”

Wyatt cleared his throat.

Joaquin opened the folder and flipped to a page. “Of the tests so far, physically Lupe is a human female. She—”

“Do not speak about me as if I’m not here,” she snapped. “You speak *to me*.”

Damn, she made him hard! She probably made them all hard, but Cristian wasn’t about to verify that by looking, or sniffing, around. Joaquin had the grace to look down, giving her the respect and the role her tone demanded. When he looked up again, it was at her.

“My apologies, lady cat.” He tilted a nod her way. “All scans show you to be completely human. If we didn’t know you’d once been a cat, we wouldn’t know it now. Even your blood panel says you’re human. Blood type O positive, by the way. From your experiences, we’ve guessed your age in cat years to be around six, which would presumably make you around forty-two in human years. However, all tests show your human body to be approximately twenty-five years old. Your brain-wave activity is high, but then, you are processing a lot of information.” The smile Joaquin tried didn’t quite make it.

“Lupe, as a cat, you had kittens. By our estimation, that was five years ago. When you were taken to the animal shelter, the vet operated and removed everything that allowed you to have babies. It’s why you haven’t mated as a cat since then. Those parts didn’t grow back once you became human.” He gave a small shake of his head. “I’m sorry. You aren’t having babies. It’s not physically possible.”

Lupe lifted her chin. “*I’m* not physically possible, and yet here I am.”

There was no explaining that one. Cristian was content to let Joaquin flounder.

Joaquin steepled his fingertips under his chin as he struggled for words. “Lupe, there’s nothing inside you to create children, nothing inside you to—”

“I’ve watched the Discovery Channel and The Learning Channel, Joaquin. I might be newly human, but I’m not stupid. I know where children come from. But I also know this”—she kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet under her, nestled firmly in the chair—“after being locked away in that cage, all I wished for was to go into the wild. When Mrs. Wallace took me into her home, she let me have that. Wish granted. Then I wished to be human, even more so when I met Cristian and Jeremy. I studied and learned as much as I could, and I wished. Wish

granted, with the bonus of loving Cristían and Jeremy. I wished I could mindspeak with them.” She paused and added, “*Wish granted.*”

Joaquin, Wyatt, and Steven sucked the air out of the room with their intakes of breath.

“*When?*” Wyatt asked.

“*Within the last hour,*” Cristían replied.

Lupe folded her hands over her stomach. “I wished for babies. Cristían's and Jeremy's babies. I cannot explain how or why. All I know is that those seeds are now inside me. Two tiny gold sparkles waiting for life. I *will* have my babies—*our* babies.”

Joaquin drew breath to respond. Wyatt jumped in.

“Quite a transition, little warrior. Any regrets for what you might have lost?”

“None.” She cocked her head to one side and studied her fingers. “Although having my claws would really come in handy from time to time.”

“Indeed it would,” Wyatt replied.

“Let's move on.” Cristían pointed to Joaquin's folder. “What did you learn about Steven?”

Joaquin flicked the folder closed. “The blood on the towels contains a very aggressive virus. It's going to take a lot of study to determine who or what it affects and how it's transmitted. After we're done here, we hope to meet with his people to work together on this.”

“Lupe bit Frieda and drew blood. Is she infected?”

Joaquin shook his head. “There's no sign of the virus in any of you, nor was there any sign of the virus in the blood samples obtained from the lab accident. So that continues to support that it isn't transferred to other species and might be unique to Steven's clan.” He squared his shoulders on a deep breath. “We introduced our semen, and the virus mutated on contact. Into what, we can't begin to guess. We tried the same procedure with our blood and saliva; no change. However, your fresh blood, Cristían, kills it, both the original strain and the mutated. As far as we can tell, there's no longer any sign of the virus in Steven's system.”

“Fresh, as in...?” Jeremy lifted his palms for a response.

“Blood to blood. Direct contact.” Joaquin snapped his fingers. “Like you two did with Steven.”

A little tricky, but they could manage that. "It's doable, I suppose, with proper medical support," Cristian said.

"There's a little bit more to it than that," Joaquin replied.

"Of course."

"Don't be a smart-ass," Joaquin snapped.

"Sorry." Cristian crossed his ankles. "I presume we've now come to me."

Joaquin nodded and scooted to the edge of his chair. The folder slipped to the floor. He left it. "Your brain-wave activity is off the chart. It's like you're using one hundred percent of your brain. I've never seen or heard of anything like it."

"Could it be from the microchip?" Jeremy leaned forward, his forearms on his knees.

"Doubtful, but you'll be able to research that aspect." Joaquin looked at him hard, then refocused his attention on Cristian. "You both took hard hits to the skull. Jeremy's X-ray shows a hint of what might have been a concussion. Cristian, you show nothing at all. Every scar you ever had is gone. You heal in an instant. Your body's producing..." He shook his head, as if he couldn't believe it himself. "Whatever it is, it's very close to stem cells. When your blood is introduced, it seems to reset the genetic code of the receiving body."

You created a monster, only you can fix it. "How?" Cristian asked. He felt small, humbled.

Joaquin spread his arms wide. "We don't know yet. The team investigating the accident site doesn't have this information either. Only the six of us here know the full impact. Your blood cured and reset Steven back to what his people were before the virus. That same blood was found on Jeremy's clothing. And though we can't say for certain, we found a small paw print overlaid with a palm with three types of blood mixed—cat, female human, and...your blood as it is now."

Logic and science. Hard to beat that. The how and why—they might never know.

"And my speed—the ability I had to move things with a wave of my arm."

"Speed, we aren't sure. The other is a subsonic sound wave of some kind. More tests..."

A lifetime of tests, and considering how long-lived their species was... Hells, was he even still part of their species? "Conceivably"—Cristian swallowed the lump of dread in his throat—"if I happen to be walking along the street and cut myself and touch someone else who has an open wound..."

No one answered. There was no need. His blood would heal the other person and reset that person's genetic code. To what, Cristian doubted even the powers that be he'd found hovering in the indigo void knew. Or maybe they did and expected him to rewrite everything, everyone. To fix whatever had gone wrong on Earth.

"I am the monster." The words came out so softly, he barely heard them. He should be screaming at the injustice, at the heavy weight of responsibility a freak accident had foisted on him. Instead his words were so quiet, it was almost as if he weren't even there. In his heart, Cristian knew why—he'd accepted his fate, whatever it might be. *Now to use it wisely.*

"You are not a monster." Lupe fell to her knees before him. Her green eyes swam with tears. "You are my Cristian."

Jeremy slipped into her seat and grabbed his arm. "There are no monsters here."

"None." The word rasped from Steven. "You are the salvation of my people."

"I am the one whose thoughtless actions mutated the virus in Frieda."

"That was inevitable." Cristian heard disagreement in Steven's voice. "We suspected a year ago and ignored it. Frieda knowingly put herself in harm's way, then spread that mutation herself through our people. First their minds go. Then their rage builds. They become more beast than human. If we'd been open with you when we first met, all of this could have been avoided. Now we have a cure. Odd how the universe works," he added with a halfhearted chuckle.

Cristian looked his way, at the hope he saw in Steven's eyes. "The cure will change them."

"So will the virus, and not in a good way."

Cristian nodded. "All right, we'll leave the choice in each individual's hands. If they see the benefit to one—"

"Then the others will follow." Steven gave a sad smile and turned to Wyatt. "They won't come here willingly. We'll have to go to them. They might want proof on the spot."

Joaquin shuffled the folders together. "I'll assemble a team, and we'll go to your compound."

"No." Cristian shook his head. "They'll see it as a threat. Let's approach a small group first. Those working at the Prentice estate would be a good start. It's a neutral location, with people from both clans on hand."

Cristían pulled in a breath and faced Jeremy and Lupe. “I want you two to stay here.”

“No!” Lupe's tousled hair whipped from side to side as she shook her head.

Jeremy's protest was right behind. “Cristían—”

“You need to work on those microchips.” He dropped his hand to Jeremy's shoulder and squeezed. “It's something only you can do. I'll be safe. We have people there.”

Jeremy gave a reluctant nod. “I don't like it, but...all right.”

Lupe dug her nails into his knees. Cristían was really glad they weren't claws. They hurt like hell just being fingernails.

“I will not be left behind. With Jeremy here, who is left to protect you?” Tears poured down her cheeks. “It is important I be with you. It is...*imperative*. I must be with you. Frieda will be there. I must be there to protect you. I must. I will. I demand. I...*I wish it!*”

Joaquin slid forward. “Cristían, she's been through tremendous changes in so short a time, her mental state—”

“There is nothing wrong with my mental state!” She turned on him so fast, Cristían feared for both their safety. “I will go with my mate! And I will defeat anyone who tries to stop me!”

Cristían wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her to his lap. “No one will stop you, my queen,” he whispered against her ear. “No one.”

With some shaky breaths and fire in her eyes, she settled against him. He stroked her hair but knew all the petting in the world wouldn't calm her. Lupe was geared for battle. Gods help the soul who stood in her way.

Her fingers gripped his shirt. “You promised no one would separate the three of us, Cristían.”

“That *is* what you promised,” Jeremy added.

Yes, he had promised that...when he knew they would all be safe. Now... Gods, he couldn't battle them both. “Yes...I did. We stick together...as promised.”

Chapter Seventeen

Cristian knew Steven's cadre of guards had followed them to the institute; after all, that had been Steven's last order to them. They'd taken him at his word and waited in the reception area for their leader. They stood as one when Steven appeared.

No one said a word. It wasn't necessary. A nod from Steven signaled to his people—two men and two women, all wearing business suits—that all was well. Still, the mountain lions waited until the six of them piled into Joaquin's red crew cab before getting into Steven's Cherokee.

Cristian drove. Joaquin and Wyatt flanked Steven in the backseat. Joaquin and Wyatt had their eyes closed, heads braced against the windows. The sleep would do them good; energize their minds and bodies for whatever was to come. Steven dozed too. His head lolled on the back of the seat, his body slumped. Cristian hoped to hells his people didn't think they'd done something to him.

Traffic was light. Cristian's mind had a tendency to wander to the many scenarios that might play out. Lupe kept him grounded—one hand on his thigh, the other on Jeremy's. None of them spoke—out loud or in their minds. After all, what was there to say?

The exit leading to the hilltop Prentice estate came more quickly than Cristian anticipated. Resembling a former rancho, the beautiful jewel of a house overlooked San Diego on its exclusive perch. No other homes occupied the hill. Former owners had made the place a fortress against the world, an homage to Maya gods. Now it belonged to the jaguar clan, a hard-earned prize in a centuries-old battle. Cristian prayed they would not be facing another battle today.

The three men in back roused when Cristian made the final turn onto the steep, winding driveway. The other vehicle was a car length behind him, as it had been the entire drive. Surveillance cameras would have picked them up by now, alerting those at the top. Work investigating the lab accident would have stopped, and members from both clans would have

come outside to await their arrival. Some might even be lurking along the perimeter with weapons.

Cristían snorted. No, any weapons would be visible, locked and loaded. Frieda and her followers were more explosive than all the C-4 in the world. Which reminded him...

"All the C-4 was removed, wasn't it?" he asked Wyatt.

"Yes, and the detonators too," he replied. "They haven't put any more in place."

Steven's sigh was subtle. But the relief Cristían saw reflected on his face in the rearview mirror wasn't.

"At least there are still a few saving graces in the world," Cristían told him.

"More than a few, I hope," Steven replied. "I can't figure out how Frieda and her rebels could manage to buy C-4, much less hide it from the rest of us. For her to have accomplished such a thing might mean alliances with factions I don't care to think about right now."

Wyatt smoothed his fingers through his hair. He looked like he could do with about twelve hours more sleep. "How do you want to do this?"

Cristían negotiated another hairpin turn. "Let's gather everyone on the lawn out back. It's open enough; no one should feel trapped." It'd give Cristían's people a better chance of escape if this all went to hell. "Steven should lead the discussion."

He briefly considered they should all be ready to shift into jaguar form in a moment's notice. That too would be seen as a threat, since it meant they'd have to go in nude. Cristían second-guessed his decision to go in "kinder and gentler" when the driveway opened to the wide parking apron before the house. Late-afternoon sun spotlighted Frieda at the forefront. She clutched a semiautomatic weapon, her green eyes as wild as the tangle of blonde hair haloed around her head. Even her own clan members looked like they feared her.

"She's gone further over the edge." Steven's voice was barely above a whisper, choked with what Cristían guessed was a mix of grief and fear.

"Perhaps telling them we were on our way and wanted a meeting wasn't such a good idea." Jeremy folded his fingers over Lupe's. "Unless I've guessed wrong, it looks like every member of the mountain lion clan is here."

"You guessed right," Steven muttered and didn't seem happy about it. His people had acted on their own, a show of force Steven hadn't authorized. What little control he had as their designated leader had slipped a little further. One bullet would depose him, and Frieda looked ready to shoot it.

Cristían didn't see any other weapons. That, at least, was a good sign people weren't on board with Frieda's tactics. But she could do a lot of damage with her weapon before someone was able to take her down.

"Any idea where she was the night you were shot?" he asked Steven.

The other man's eyes widened at the thought one of his own may have tried to kill him. "I haven't asked for anyone's whereabouts. My guard was supposed to give me a couple of hours at your place and then come to check if they hadn't heard from me. I didn't think to ask if they saw the shooter, and they haven't mentioned anything. I haven't made them aware I was shot."

"Frieda wouldn't leave that lab," Jeremy said. "She's too intent on finding evidence against us."

Which also meant she wasn't going to be open to what Steven was about to propose.

Frieda scowled as both vehicles pulled to a stop. Jaguar and mountain lion clans both gave her wide berth. Her finger was on the trigger, the weapon welded to her hand. There'd be no convincing her to set it aside either. Cristían wondered if she'd been holding everyone hostage, demanding they find something—a frightening possibility.

"My men will have weapons in their vehicle," Steven said. "I would like it not to come to that."

No one wanted it to come to *that*, but was it really so much of a risk when Cristían could presumably heal them all?

Jeremy twisted around, glaring at Steven. "Guns? You people fight dirty."

"We fight to stay alive." Steven clicked his seat belt open and scooted to the edge of his seat. "You jaguars live in the safety of the carefully structured world you've built. You've integrated into society, while we've lived on the fringes despite our best efforts. Shifting into our cat forms skylined us to ranchers and poachers. Even in human form, we've had to deal with drug dealers and those who are smuggling people over the border. When faced with guns, we acquired

our own and shut ourselves off from a world that would rather shoot first and never bother to ask questions later.”

“And became those you revile,” Jeremy softly replied.

Cristían braced himself for a battle. None came.

“So it seems,” Steven said softly. “But you can't convince me the jaguars don't use firearms. I know better. We all do whatever it takes.” He pointed to the door. “If you please...”

Cristían cut the engine when Joaquin pushed the door open. They exited quickly, as did Steven's people from the other vehicle. They'd glamourised their attire to jeans and T-shirts. The tallest, a man who could have easily passed for Steven's brother—they all could, they looked so much alike—loped toward them. The other three moved to the back hatch, awaiting further word.

“Leave the weapons in the Jeep. Be prepared to take Frieda down if it becomes necessary. This is to be a peaceful encounter.” Steven's voice was loud and clear; so was his intent.

“Take *me* down?” Frieda screeched and charged his way, her weapon pointed skyward. Despite his orders, his guard scrambled for the weapons in the Jeep.

Steven snapped his palm up. “Stop...all of you.”

The guard stood down. Frieda did not. Cristían kept Lupe behind him. Jeremy guarded her from the rear. One swoop from Cristían's arm could knock Frieda down. That trigger finger and his lack of skill with the power kept Cristían from doing so.

“We've agreed the rear lawn is the best place for our meeting,” Steven said, then turned his back on Frieda and started in that direction.

“You're a braver man than I am,” Cristían told him.

“I'm glad it seems that way. My insides are quaking.”

“We've got your back,” Jeremy said, falling in step with Cristían.

“And who's got yours?”

“Lupe, of course,” they replied.

Steven snickered. *“Of course. I should be so well championed.”*

There was a silent but collective mindspeak gasp among the jaguars when they realized Jeremy and Steven now had that ability. No one bothered to explain; enlightenment would come soon enough.

Frieda stormed by, her small band of followers close behind. Whether they trailed her out of fear or loyalty, Cristian couldn't be sure and didn't really give a damn. The fact they were with her made them untrustworthy and worthy of extra attention.

Everyone fanned out in the growing shade on the east side of the house. Jaguars and mountain lions jockeyed for position. No one put their backs against the wall. It was bad enough all the leaders were in one spot. Frieda could mow them down in the blink of an eye.

How much blood would it take to heal everyone? Cristian would drain himself dry to save his own. Could he make that sacrifice for the others, the mountain lions, even those who were innocent victims of Frieda's madness?

By unspoken command, they spread out before the gathering—Cristian and his people on the left, Steven and his guard on the right. Frieda never budged, still at the front, weapon clutched for discharge.

“At least have the courtesy to lower that to your side,” Cristian told her.

Frieda smirked. “For old times' sake, lover.”

A warning growl rumbled low in Lupe's throat. Frieda's gaze slid her way. She flexed her fingers around the grip. In turn, Lupe curled her fingers. He would have called it a good bluff, but he knew Lupe wasn't bullshitting. She fully intended to kick Frieda's ass if necessary.

Cristian and Steven exchanged a look. At Cristian's nod, Steven took one step forward.

“A lot's happened the last several days,” he began. “One thing above all others has become apparent. We must work together as a team. All of us, mountain lion and jaguar alike.”

Murmurs rippled through the group. People fidgeted where they stood and eyed the person standing next to them.

Wyatt clasped his hand over his wrist, arms relaxed in front of him. “The accident here the other day was an unfortunate breach of our treaty, but it was a treaty we'd all broken before the ink was even dry. All of us know that and acknowledge it. Secrets were kept and information withheld on both sides.”

“Yes! That *he'd* planned to steal my body!” Frieda waved the gun at Cristian. “Don't deny it!” She whirled around. “Someone play the tape! It's proof!”

“There's no need.” Cristian reminded himself she wasn't of sound mind, that he'd played a hand in her incapacity. “I fully admit my intent. The explosion in the lab was an accident. All you have to do is look to see how it changed us. We've nothing to hide.”

“Someone's hiding something,” she snapped. “I see no change in you.”

“Cristian's blood now has the power to heal.” Steven's voice rose. “I no longer have the virus.”

More whispers.

“I've had that verified by lab tests.”

“In their labs,” someone shouted.

“And in other ways.” Steven formed a claw and ripped his shirt down the front. Shock widened the mountain lions' eyes, and their mouths dropped open when they realized the clothes he wore were real, not glamoured. The jaguars eased themselves away from the mountain lions.

“I can also speak in my mind again, like our ancestors did,” Steven told them.

“Are you still one of us, or has that changed too?” Frieda asked.

Steven stripped away his clothing, letting it fall in scattered puddles around his feet. Once he was nude, the air shimmered, and a mountain lion replaced his human form. He changed back and faced them, fists on hips. “I am healed. The cost is a change from what we've become back to what we once were. I can't form clothing or the look of another person. The blood resets our genetic profile.”

A female guard cut ranks and stepped to him. “How?”

“Blood-to-blood contact,” Cristian replied. “My blood to yours. When Steven came to my house the other night, someone shot him.”

Frieda snorted. “Probably you.”

“They were inside.” Steven cut her a look. “Maybe it was *you*.”

“If I were going to shoot anyone, it'd be one of them.” Again, she waved the weapon wildly.

"I'm well aware you want me gone," Steven told her. "I'll find out soon enough if it was you. We're investigating the scene."

"We?" Her lip and left nostril lifted in a sneer. "Or *them*?" She jerked her head toward the jaguar leaders.

"The time for *we* and *them* is over." Steven held his arms out, palms up, pleading for them to listen. "I was near death. Cristian bled himself to save me. The accident opened our eyes to each other's faults, but it was a blessing in disguise. Rather than have this pull us further apart, we can use this as a catalyst for change. They can heal us. We can work together. We can have our lives back!" His gaze locked onto that of the female guard standing nearest to him. "We can all love again, Sophie." He stepped into her space and cupped her cheek. "Little sister, I would never lie to you."

Cristian watched her eyes fill with unshed tears. Sophie blinked them away and took a step in Cristian's direction.

"How do we do this?" She held her arm out. "A large wound or small?"

"Let's make it nice and large!" Frieda whipped the gun up in a burst of fire.

Divots of grass gouged a line straight for Sophie. Cristian grabbed her arm to wrest her to safety. Something tawny flashed at the edge of his vision as he rolled them to the ground. He shoved Sophie's shoulder down and jumped to his feet.

Steven's long claws caged Frieda's throat against the ground. Her firing wrist was crushed under a guard's heel, the weapon now in his possession. She clawed for breath with her one hand, raking it down Steven's hand and arm until she choked against the blood pouring into her mouth. Steven didn't budge.

Sophie gasped and reached for Cristian's side. "You've been shot!"

Half-dazed, he touched where she indicated. A small chunk of his side was missing. Pain scored red-hot streaks through him. Not his pain. Whispers in his brain, fog, voices telling him...something.

Screaming cut through the noise in Cristian's head. A gut-wrenching, agonized denial that twisted his insides. He collapsed to his knees. Shock blinded him. *He* was screaming. *His* voice was raw and reverberating inside his skull. He saw but didn't want to know.

Only you can fix this.

“No. No...please...not this.” His plea came out a whimper.

“Lupe! Oh my God, Lupe!” Jeremy skidded to his knees beside her; shaking fingers fluttered over her bloodied torso. Her green eyes stared at the sky, unblinking. She gasped for breath, grappling for their hands.

No! Cristian couldn't breathe either. “Noooo!”

Cristian gave her the handhold she needed—the lifeline *he* needed.

“Save you,” she managed to say. “Saved you.”

Cristian viewed her through a veil of tears. She'd protected him, knowing she could be killed. “Crazy little warrior. I would have healed.”

“Not through the heart.”

Lupe was right. Still, a bullet to the chest couldn't have hurt his heart as much as it ached right now. He was going to lose her, one way or the other.

“Love you. I wish...I wish...” She dropped her hand over her belly, and her eyes fluttered closed.

“Cristian, she's dying,” Jeremy choked out. “Do something.”

“But...but she'll be changed.” He'd never hold her again, never watch the wonder in her eyes, never hear her laughter, never feel her body beneath his.

Jeremy fisted his shirt and yanked him close. “At least she'd be alive,” he said through clenched teeth. “I'd rather have her as a cat than never have her in my life again.”

Cristian tugged his shirt up to the wound at his side. It had already started to heal. Bullets pimped to the surface and popped out. Rage and frustration screamed inside him.

He thrust his fists into the air, roaring at the injustice, the sacrifice Lupe had made. Paws formed. Long, lethal claws gleamed in the lengthening shadows. He raked them down his chest, shredding his shirt and skin.

“No!” Jeremy clamped his hands around Cristian's wrists. “Not like this! You'll rip yourself down to the spine. I can't lose you too. We do this together.”

Jeremy released him and formed claws. “Together.”

Cristían nodded his assent and slipped his arm under Lupe. She had to be in place the instant he had good blood flow. She was limp in his hold. She didn't make a sound; not so much as a whimper.

"We've got to hurry." Already the wounds he'd inflicted upon himself seconds ago had started to heal.

Cristían put Jeremy's claws on his chest. He placed his own over his stomach. Claws pierced his skin and the muscle beneath, and together he and Jeremy ripped him open. Vertical and horizontal gouges crisscrossed his flesh, each rake going a little deeper, longer, over and over again, until blood poured from the wounds.

"No more," Jeremy whispered. "Hurry."

Cristían drew Lupe flush against his body. He was weaker than he'd anticipated, but the grief did that to a person, ate away one's soul. His arms shook from the effort to keep them together.

"Here." Jeremy curled his body around Lupe's from behind and locked his arms and legs around them both.

"If I could have one wish..." Cristían's tears dripped down his chin and into her hair.

"I know..." Jeremy buried his face against Lupe's neck.

"Love you both so much." Her voice whispered into their minds, giving them hope and the strength to hang on.

Her breathing grew to quick, heavy pants as the minutes ticked by. She wiggled between them, wanting more space. The last thing either of them wanted was to let her go. Reluctantly they pulled apart and laid her between them on the cool grass. Her wounds were gone, her eyes still closed. They stroked their hands over her hair and face, down her arms and sides. And wished.

Cristían wanted to say it was approaching sunset that made her body shimmer. Wanted to say it was the tears that still overwhelmed him that played tricks with his vision. Wanted to say his fingers only imagined thick, silky fur under them. Wanted to...but couldn't. With each breath, the woman they loved faded, and the calico cat she'd been replaced her.

"Stupid little cat." Frieda snickered.

Cristían sprang up with a roar and hurled himself toward the woman. Why was she still alive? He lifted his arms, ready to blast her molecules back to hell.

Joaquin blocked his path. “No, my friend.” He clasped his shoulders. “No. You’re not the monster.” He added a gentle shake. “Think how many others could be hurt by taking Frieda down. You don’t want that.”

Cristían flexed his shoulders and pulled in slender threads of control. “There’s your proof.” He waved his arm to Lupe. Jeremy cradled her small body. The tip of her long tail flicked. “What more do you people want? You’ve taken two women from my life...”

And the babies Lupe swore she carried inside her. Now they’d never know. *Kittens?* Cristían winced at the thought. Lupe would be thrilled, but it felt like a universal slap in the face.

“Yet I still offer to save yours.” He glared at Frieda. “Even *your* worthless hide.” She’d be the last one healed. If there were any justice in the universe, lightning would strike her dead before he got to her.

Sophie slipped her fingers over his forearm. “You saved my life. Would you be willing to do it again?” She scored a long furrow down her arm and offered it to him.

Cristían stared at the blood, then opened a wound that matched the canyon-sized gash on his heart.

Chapter Eighteen

Cristian looked pale against the white sheets that evening. He'd given a lot of blood. Jeremy was scared to death he'd bleed himself dry trying to save the mountain lion clan. But it was done, even Frieda, though she'd fought like hell against it. The guards had pinned her down, and Sophie had sliced open a wound on Frieda's arm to receive Cristian's blood. It was either do that or continue to watch Frieda spiral into madness. She'd cried herself to exhaustion when the cure took hold, begged everyone's forgiveness afterward. Few were moved. Jeremy supposed forgiveness would come with time, when they accepted it was the mutated virus that created the monster she'd become.

Tests confirmed the virus was gone. The fact the mountain lions could mindspeak, coupled with their obvious lack of clothing, should have been proof enough, but Cristian demanded scientific proof to back it up. While Steven and Wyatt went to a nearby Wal-Mart on an initial clothing run, Jeremy and Joaquin found a portion of the estate lab miraculously intact and were able to run the tests on-site. Dressed, reassured, and beyond exhausted, both clans took advantage of the many bedrooms throughout the home and called it a night.

Jeremy hoped they slept better than he did. He ached in places he never knew he had, inside and out. His mind raced a thousand miles a minute, trying to assemble all that had happened the last few days into logical order, even though he'd learned long ago there wasn't much logic in a shape-shifter world. It simply was.

Lupe had made herself comfortable on the king-size bed. She stretched out from nose to tail, her legs fully extended. From time to time, she'd roll into him or Cristian, then resettle until another part of her made contact with the other man. He wondered if she realized what had happened, or if she even remembered her time as a human. God, he missed her! Her unrestrained laughter, her thrill at experiencing the world from a new perspective, her spirit and fire.

Had he made a mistake, asking Cristian to save her? Doomed her back to the cat life she'd longed to escape for his own selfish heart?

As if in answer, her tail flicked his chest. He looped thumb and forefinger around the thick mass and watched her slither it loose, only to flick it back his way.

"If we keep this up, we'll wake up Cristian," he whispered.

Lupe regarded him through slitted eyes. She crawled up to his face and touched noses. Jeremy scratched her ears. Still no purr.

Cristian grumbled in his sleep and turned his back on them. No sense both of them losing sleep. He set Lupe next to Cristian and eased from the bed, then hauled on a clean T-shirt to go with his sweatpants. Lupe hopped to the floor then darted ahead of him to the stairs.

"You're probably hungry."

"Brrrow."

Sounded like a yes to him. "Let's see what we can find in the kitchen." Jeremy scooped her up and trotted down the sweeping staircase. Light filtered his way from the kitchen. "Looks like we're not the only ones who can't sleep, my queen."

She butted noses again, then rubbed her cheek against his.

"I love you too."

Joaquin, Wyatt, and Steven sat at the round black granite table in the dining nook, coffee mugs and a bag of Oreo cookies sitting between them.

"Midnight snack?" Jeremy set Lupe on her feet. She hopped into a vacant chair at the table.

Joaquin offered her a taste of cookie, chuckling when she growled at it. "I bet I know what you'd like."

Jeremy snagged the can of cat treats from the cabinet and tossed it Joaquin's way, then poured a mug of coffee and joined them. Her tail swept from side to side, her body nearly quivering while she waited for Joaquin to open the new can. He fished several treats out and placed them on the edge of the table for her, then popped one in his mouth and offered the can to Jeremy. He turned up his nose, much in the same way Lupe had at the cookie, then shrugged.

"What the hell." He snagged one and shuddered as it went down. "Those just don't get any better."

Lupe rolled in the chair. He swore she was laughing. Her eyes were bright, as if humor resided within.

“We're discussing plans to bring Steven's clan into the institute,” Wyatt said. “Matching their skills with jobs available.”

Jeremy took a sip of coffee. It didn't go well with cat treats, but then, nothing did. “I couldn't sleep. If you still have that tracking chip on you, I can analyze it. There's no better place than the computer lab downstairs.”

“I do.” Joaquin patted his pocket. “Mind if I join you?”

“Two heads and all that...” Jeremy grabbed his coffee, and they stood. Lupe snagged a final treat and followed.

The chirp of Wyatt's cell phone stopped them at the door. No good news came at this time of night.

“Probably Trina,” he said, then frowned at the caller ID and ducked outside to take the call.

“She's carrying triplets,” Joaquin told Steven. “About six months along and confined to bed to help prevent premature labor.” He added a chuckle. “It's feast or famine with procreation in our clan.”

Steven gave a sad smile. “We'd like a little of feast ourselves right now. There haven't been babies born in...a long time.”

“That'll change now, with the virus gone. If not, we'll work together to find a way.”

Wyatt swung back into the house, stuffing his cell in his pocket. “We have a problem.”

“What kind of a problem?” Cristian grumbled as he walked into the room. His hair stood spiked up in disarray, his eyes still unfocused from waking up. Jeremy handed him his mug. Cristian needed the caffeine more than he did. Cristian slugged it down while Lupe twined through his legs. Joaquin gave him a refill.

“Our investigative team found a bullet lodged in a tree across the street from your house. The team traced backward but couldn't find a casing to go with it.” Wyatt's lips tightened to a thin line. It'd been a long time since Jeremy had seen him this angry. “Ballistics matched it to one of our own weapons.”

“One of *our* people tried to kill Steven? Fuck!” Cristian scrubbed a hand down his whiskered face. He waved his hand. “Who? Why?”

“You have the serial number of the weapon?” Jeremy asked.

“Yes, they checked the weapons on hand and didn't find it. We need to search the weapons our men have here.” Wyatt touched Steven's shoulder. “I'm so sorry. We'll get to the bottom of this.”

“Believe me, I understand.” Steven pushed his chair back and stood. “Let's conduct the search quietly. I'd really prefer my people didn't find out about this.”

“This person did *not* act with our consent.” Cristian smacked his empty mug down.

Lupe balanced on her hind legs and pressed her forepaws against his knee. He glanced down, sighed, and scooped her up. “I'm sorry. All that we've been through, all we've sacrificed...”

Jeremy wrapped his arm around Cristian's shoulder. “Wyatt and Joaquin can handle this.” With a jerk of his head, Jeremy motioned Wyatt and Joaquin to proceed with the weapons check. Then he led Cristian toward the table. “You need something more in your stomach besides coffee...or cat treats,” he added to Lupe.

Cristian sank behind the table, Lupe cradled on his lap. He stroked her fur and zoned out while Jeremy and Steven whipped up a meal guaranteed to give his arteries a healing challenge—tuna melts dripping with butter, onions, and cheese. Lupe perched on Cristian's lap, alert for her fair share.

Wyatt and Joaquin were back before the leftovers could chill. None of the serial numbers matched. They helped themselves to sandwiches and sank into their chairs. Jeremy doubted either man was hungry, considering they'd demolished a bag of cookies. They ate to have something to do, to quell their frustration.

“I'm presuming you don't have a log for weapons assignments?” Steven asked.

“Do you?” Cristian pulled an onion away from Lupe's reach and replaced it with tuna.

“All of our shifters have access to the weapons. Other personnel must sign in and out,” Joaquin explained. “There are so few of us...”

"It's the same with us." Steven waved off his apology. "Except we have no support personnel. There's only us. Despite your safeguards, it's possible one of the support staff could have the gun."

"But why would they want to kill you?" Jeremy asked. "How could they know you'd even be there? Only your guard knew that."

No one chewed. Or breathed. Or moved. Not even Lupe.

"They wanted us," Jeremy said in a rush of breath. "They were there to kill *us*."

Lupe's growl rumbled through the room. He could almost hear her now. *I will defeat them!* she'd declare and put all her focus toward doing just that.

"Check our weapons too." Steven shoved away from the table. "It could have been slipped among them. Fingerprints will tell us who's handled it."

Cristian grabbed his arm, holding him in place. "That will risk our peace."

"Better to lose the peace than your lives." Steven clamped his hand over Cristian's, squeezed, then motioned Wyatt and Joaquin to follow him.

Jeremy scanned the wall of windows behind Cristian. "I don't know about you, but I feel like a sitting duck right now."

Cristian's gaze darted to the side. "Uh...yeah."

Lupe jumped to the floor and trotted to the more protected kitchen. She glanced around, flicked her tail, and meowed for them to follow. Neither of them hesitated, gathering dishes to cover their escape to a safety zone. They'd just finished washing the last pan when the other three men returned.

"Nothing," Joaquin said.

Relief eased the tension in Jeremy's shoulders, but a growing headache remained. The food in his stomach threatened to come back up. "That's good. We'll presume we're safe for the night." Especially since he planned to be down in the lab with Cristian and Lupe. He'd lock them in if he had to. "Where's that chip? I'd like to start analyzing it."

"Are you sure you want to do this now?" Joaquin fished the small vial from his jeans pocket. The tiny chip still rested inside.

"I have to do something to keep my mind off things." Jeremy wrapped his hand around it. "There's no safer place than that basement. I might as well maximize my time. Who's with me?" He scooped Lupe up with his free hand. "You don't have a choice, little lady." He started to say the same thing to Cristian, but his friend was already leading the way. The other three were close on their heels.

Lights clicked on the instant the door to the basement opened. Jeremy had always compared the feature to an entity coming to life. It'd been his domain for the last year—the laboratory, computer room, surveillance area—and he'd loved every second of it. Loved it even more when Cristian and Lupe joined him. The knowledge these rooms possessed was beyond comprehension. One tiny mistake, one error in judgment, had nearly destroyed it all and them with it. He'd remember that for the future. The entire world's discoveries and the universe's mysteries weren't worth people's lives.

They trooped into the computer room, and Jeremy made a note to move the location farther from the lab as soon as possible. If they'd lost these computers and the data bank... He didn't want to think about the wealth of data that could have been lost.

Jeremy set Lupe on her feet, and she raced for a seat. Cristian beat her to it by a second, laughing at her scowl.

"If you sit on my lap, you'll have a better view," he said.

Lupe's gaze wandered to the space between the computers, then she deigned to sit on Cristian. Joaquin, Wyatt, and Steven drew rolling chairs up around Jeremy.

"Okay, let's see what we've got." Jeremy sat down. All the equipment he needed was at his fingertips. His computer stations never lacked for technology; a lot of it he had designed. He snapped the chip into the testing module. The small screen flashed to life.

"It's still working," he told the others. "Cristian's GPS code comes up. It's also still transmitting. Let's see if we can find out what it's saying."

Jeremy attached the device to the computer via a USB cable. A few strokes of the keyboard brought the information to the monitor, strings of binary code. "And the translation is..."

"Is there any doubt?" Cristian leaned closer. Lupe craned her neck, ears perked. The men behind Jeremy held their breath.

A yellow wave swept down the screen. Words replaced code. *Skinwalker. You created a monster. You are a monster. Only you can fix this. Kill them all and die.*

“Who would feed this into your head?” Steven asked.

“The same person who shot a rifle at my house.” Cristian eased back, pulling Lupe close for the comfort petting her gave him.

“We've got to get these out of everyone's heads,” Joaquin said. “Can we tell if this is being transmitted to anyone else? If so, can we jam the signal?”

“I have another little tool that might be able to give us that information.” Jeremy reached for the device. Electricity bolted from it to his fingers. They all jerked back.

“Goddamn, that hurt.” Jeremy shook life back into his hand.

“I thought we were guarded against static down here,” Wyatt said. “We'll have to have techs do a run-through. The accident could have compromised the protection.”

“No”—Jeremy shook his head—“it happened before the accident too.” He reached for the device once more.

Cristian grabbed his arm, excitement radiating off him and over Jeremy's skin. “That's what caused the explosion. Remember? I touched the counter, electricity arced, and it all went to hell. A headache stabbed into me right before. That had to have been when the chip was activated. It caused a surge and...”

Boom.

“Plausible.” Joaquin nodded. “Anything else happen? Anything new? Anyone down here but you two—uhm—three?”

Lupe hissed and swiped her paw through the air.

“Barry,” Jeremy and Cristian said together.

“He was punching numbers into his cell phone as he stormed up the stairs.” Horror washed over Cristian's face. “*Damn.* It wasn't his cell. He was activating the chip!”

“I thought it was his cell too,” Joaquin muttered. “He was frantic to find it when we left. I didn't think much of it. We all know how attached he is to the thing.”

The information seeped in, then...

“He's got the women and children!” Wyatt and Joaquin's chairs shot out from behind them.

* * * *

Good gods! Cristian's mind screamed.

Wyatt and Joaquin charged toward the staircase. Joaquin yanked his cell phone from his pocket. The men were nearly to the stairs and Joaquin's shaking thumb was hovering over the keypad when Cristian finally had the presence of mind to leap around them to bar their way.

"Stop!" He shoved his hands into their shoulders. "If you call the women, it's going to alarm them. Who else is at the safe house with them?"

"Only Barry." Wyatt covered his eyes. "I can't believe... Gods, how stupid..."

Cristian lightly shook Wyatt's shoulder and tried to make eye contact. They couldn't fall apart now. Only level heads would see them through. "You can't see what someone else is determined to hide. Let's presume for now that I am the only target."

"You and whoever he wanted you to kill," Joaquin snapped.

"Which would be me." Jeremy strode their way, Lupe and Steven close behind. "Possibly Frieda."

"Your instincts were working when you didn't tell Barry about the chip." Cristian squared his shoulders and dropped the holds he had on Wyatt and Joaquin. "He's unaware we suspect him. We have to keep him that way, or he could very well turn on the women and children. While Carmen is fully capable of defending herself, Trina can't shift while pregnant, and there are the twins to worry about. We don't want this to end badly."

"He'd have a weapon with him. Maybe more than one." Joaquin started to pace. "You know how he hates to dirty his claws." He buried his face in his hands. "Damn, my wife...my little girls."

Lupe jumped to Joaquin's shoulder and butted her head against his cheek. Joaquin feathered his fingers through her fur and blinked his tears away.

"Thank you, little warrior. You always know how to calm us."

"First things first." Cristian followed the path Joaquin had just taken, pacing while he talked. "Deactivating the chips might alert him if he's installed protocols to do so. It would also take too long to determine that. Best move would be to remove the chips we can. We'll wake the men and bring them down here. It won't take long."

“What if they tell Barry?” Steven asked.

Cristian shrugged and put out his palms. “Why would they? They don't know he's a suspect. We tell them we've discovered a glitch and are removing them, and that we'll be heading to the safe house to take care of the others.”

“You can't go there without some kind of support.” Steven parked himself in Cristian's path. “You can't ask your men without risking one of them contacting Barry. Let us help you. Please, it's the least we can do. I'll assemble those I trust the most. My personal guard, maybe two more. We have the skills and weapons...if that becomes necessary. Sophie too. Should Trina go into labor, she can help her. Granted, it's been a while, but I'm sure her birthing skills aren't lost. We'll be discreet. He'll never know we're there, unless it becomes necessary.”

Steven was asking for the trust that had been so much a part of their conversations tonight. The history of the two clans wasn't good, though the strides they'd made tonight promised peace. But in accepting Steven's help, the jaguars would not only be giving the mountain lions the location of their only safe house, but also access to their women and children, the future of the clan.

Cristian slid his gaze to Joaquin and then to Wyatt. Centuries of working together told in the look the three exchanged. The leaders were leaving the final decision up to Cristian. Their emotions were too compromised.

“Thank you,” he told Steven. “Assemble your team quietly while we remove the chips from our men. We should be ready to leave in thirty minutes.”

Steven nodded and took the stairs two at a time.

“We'll take separate vehicles; otherwise it'll look strange to Barry,” Cristian said. “He'll be expecting we've resolved the conflict.”

“He might question why you're there,” Joaquin said.

“My presence might be enough to take him off guard,” Cristian replied. “He might seek me out privately. He's not going to be pleased to know my blood has healing properties.”

“And if he tries to kill you?” Wyatt asked. “It only takes one bullet in the right place.”

Cristian grinned and lifted Lupe off Joaquin's shoulder. “I have a little warrior on my side.” He scratched her under the chin, earning the first purr they'd heard from Lupe since she'd been transformed back into cat form. “Ready to do battle and defeat someone?”

Lupe hissed and flashed her claws in the air.

Chapter Nineteen

Damn straight, Lupe was ready. It was horribly inconvenient that she'd been stuck in this form again and couldn't tell them that. She'd done the best she could using body language. Thankfully they had listened.

Lupe strolled the perimeter of the lab, on guard for danger, while the men removed the tracking chips. What in the world had gone wrong with her wish magic? Yes, she had said it would be nice to have her claws back, but she didn't mean at the expense of her human form. In fact, she distinctly remembered thinking at the time it would be great to have it all. Now *this*. Frustration made her fur stand on end. She'd figure it out later. For now they had little ones to protect.

If Barry so much as touches a tiny dark hair on their little heads...

Oooo...she'd rip him to shreds and have Jeremy tie Cristian in a thousand knots to keep him from saving the weasel-faced bastard. Lupe knew he was no good. He'd always had a foul stench about him. He and Frieda would have made a great pair.

The thought made her pause in midstride. Where was Frieda right now?

Lupe glanced over her shoulder. The men were nearly done. It'd only take a few minutes for her to track and see if Frieda was still in the house or the vicinity. Lupe had every inch of the estate mapped.

She raced up the stairs, then lifted her nose once her paws struck the plush carpet at the top. Steven had his team assembled in the living area. Their voices were hushed as they made plans. Sophie inventoried the contents of a medical bag. Her long blonde hair was coiled atop her head in a braid that didn't dare come loose. She was bright, energetic. Lupe liked her the minute she'd seen her, and appreciated her skills, even while she hoped they wouldn't be necessary.

Lupe eliminated the first floor and hurried up the staircase to the bedrooms. She trotted along the circular landing, sniffing rooms as she went. No Frieda anywhere up here. Lupe darted

down to the atrium at the center of the house. The hot tub in the middle was silent, lights off. A breeze tickled her fur. Someone had left an access door open. She trotted through the breezeway and exited at the pool.

Frieda sat nude on top of the fake rocks and stared at her reflection in the still water below. She shifted in and out of her mountain lion form—no, pulsed really. One and then the other. Over and over. Sad, lonely, much like Steven had been that night in Cristian's house. Frieda's quest and subsequent madness had cost her dearly.

Lupe turned to go back inside.

"I was wondering how long it would take you to find me, little cat," Frieda said. The words didn't fall with their usual sarcasm, but Lupe still didn't trust them. "You'll be pleased to know the bite you gave me has finally healed, but the scar remains. Cristian's blood didn't wipe the slate completely clean."

Lupe edged closer but not too near, as the swimming pool threatened. Some fears were very real when one was a little cat. This one would remain, just like Frieda's scar.

Frieda lifted her face into the breeze. "They'll never forgive me. I don't blame them. I can't forgive myself. I wish it could be different. I wish I could just disappear and start all over again. Do you suppose they'd miss me if I did?"

Lupe sat at the edge of the patio and stared. What else was she supposed to do? She couldn't speak, and she didn't much give a damn about Frieda anyway.

Frieda stood and stretched. Pool lights cast her in an eerie blue glow. Then her knees flexed, and she dived into the water. Lupe dodged the splash and walked away.

Water exploded behind her as Frieda surfaced. Lupe ignored her and kept walking. More water splashed—Frieda crawling out. She heard footsteps slapping the concrete behind her. Lupe quickened her pace.

"Stupid, interfering little cat!"

Frieda snagged the end of Lupe's tail, then clamped her claws in the scruff of Lupe's neck. Lupe howled with rage. The sound echoed through the adjoining atrium. Twisting and spitting, she fought Frieda's hold.

Frieda shook her hard. "Fight all you want, you little bitch. I've had enough of you to last a lifetime, and thanks to our boyfriend, that promises to be a very long time. I'm not going to live it breathing the same air as you."

Lupe felt Frieda's muscles flex, her body leave the ground...and then they plunged into Lupe's biggest nightmare.

Water closed over her head. She thrashed for freedom, claws scoring Frieda's arms. Red clouds darkened the water. Filtered through the blue light, it looked purple. She saw that night, that horrible box, the father weighing it down with rocks, her babies...her babies...

Lupe prayed she could hold her breath a little longer and sank her teeth into Frieda's wrist. Bubbles sputtered from Frieda's mouth. She kicked to the surface, having no choice but to take Lupe with her.

Blessed air rushed her lungs. Lupe released her hold to suck it in. Blood poured from the wound on Frieda's wrist. Rage mottled the woman's face, half-mountain lion, half...not even close to human. Frieda's muscles flexed for another dive. Lupe shoved upward, smacking her forehead into Frieda's. Her forehead! Surprise bulged Frieda's eyes. Lupe shoved again, snapping a human hand tipped with lethal claws around Frieda's neck.

"I'm going to defeat you once and for all," Lupe said through clenched teeth.

Frieda swiped at her, tangling Lupe's long hair in her claws.

Lupe winced at the pain but held on. "Pull it all out. It'll grow back. I'll wish it back, longer and fuller than ever. I get what I wish for...and I wish you dead."

Frieda's snarl echoed off the walls. Feet clawed at Lupe's belly. Lupe darted forward and clamped her teeth over Frieda's nose. Blood filled her mouth. Frieda thrashed for freedom, then plunged them both under. Lupe had no choice but to let go of her nose or drown. She ducked another blow from those powerful legs and clamped her claws over Frieda's shoulder. Frieda kicked for the surface again. Lupe held her under.

Shouts reached them now. Lupe didn't care. She would not be defeated. Someone jumped in beside them, a lot of someones. She felt Cristian and Jeremy foremost. Arms pulled her free, tucked her in the cove of their bodies, and pulled her up for air.

Lupe burst from the water on a gasp. "Where is she? Where is that bitch?"

"Defeated, my queen." Pride filled Cristian's voice.

Lupe glanced to the side of the pool where Frieda lay. Blood spurted from the gouge in her neck.

“She did it herself when they hauled her from the pool.” Jeremy wrapped his arms around her. “You’re back, love. You’re back.”

Lupe stared at her body in wonder. The wounds Frieda had inflicted healed before her eyes. Emotion clogged her throat. Water leaked from everywhere. She cupped Cristian’s and Jeremy’s cheeks, nuzzled against their faces, and kissed them.

“I’ve really had all the water I can take for now,” she whispered.

“I can imagine,” Cristian replied. “Let’s get you dried off.”

He pulled her to the side. Jeremy jumped out and helped her up. Joaquin wrapped a thick towel around her. Lupe spared a glance at Frieda’s body. Her clan gathered around. Frieda was wrong. They had cared. They’d cared very much.

“We need to have a doctor check you out,” Wyatt said.

Lupe shook her head. Water droplets scattered. “No, we have more important things to do. I’m ready to fight.”

Cristian’s chuckle tickled through her. “We have no doubt about that, my queen.” He scooped her into his arms and carried her inside.

* * * *

Cristian would have loved nothing more than to spend the next month in bed with Lupe and Jeremy. He couldn’t believe they’d gotten her back, and better than ever, since she’d returned with shifting and healing abilities. Light gleamed in her eyes every time she flashed her claws, and she practiced a lot on the trip to the safe house in the mountains nearby.

Wyatt and Joaquin led the way. They had a loose plan in place, most of which relied on taking Barry by surprise and getting him to play his hand. Cristian didn’t know what they’d do at that point. There were only ten members of the original jaguar clan left—Carmen and the nine men. Trina was of a snow leopard line originating in Russia. Of course, there were the new babies, and now Jeremy. But losing one who’d served at your side for centuries pained them all. Cristian wanted to say it wasn’t his choice or responsibility to decide Barry’s fate. Wyatt and

Joaquin were the leaders. But in the last several days, they had ceded some of that load to Cristian. He couldn't—he wouldn't—ignore that honor and the responsibility that went with it.

"Why do you suppose Frieda attacked Lupe?" Jeremy asked.

"Because she hated me." Sprawled in the backseat, seat belt twisted around her hips, Lupe flexed her claws in the sunlight.

"Her clan agreed to an autopsy," Cristian said. "A team will be harvesting her organs for full evaluation, but it might be that the virus had taken too much of a toll to return her to normal." That would make sense, make it easier for her people to accept.

"Do you suppose Barry somehow contracted the virus from them?" Jeremy drummed his fingers on the armrest.

"That would explain a lot." Cristian wished it could be that way. It would save them all so much heartache. He had a feeling... No, he *knew* the source of Barry's hatred.

Skinwalker.

Cristian's newfound ability would only seat the belief more fully in his mind. Barry would kill them all, rather than see that menace unleashed on the world again. His life's mission had been focused on ferreting out that entity. With the last two eliminated the year before, the reason for Barry's existence, his sole purpose in life, had also died. He saw monsters where none existed, just like the mountain lion clan had in the past. Barry would see the jaguars sequestered from the world, fearing any outsider. How long before they ate the infected rat? Before they all went insane?

Kill or be killed.

Cristian didn't want it to come to that point, didn't want to have to put a bullet through Barry's head, didn't want to lose another clansman, even one who drove him up the wall. But to save the others?

You created a monster. Only you can fix this.

His fault. His actions. His experiments that helped push Barry over the edge.

"Hey..." Jeremy tapped the console between them. "I hate to nag, but you're pushing eighty-five, and we're heading up the mountain. We're cats, not birds."

Cristían snickered. “Sorry, distracted.” He glanced in the rearview mirror. “Love, we’ll be there in about five minutes. Now would be a good time to shift.”

Lupe swung her feet to the floor and unlatched her seat belt. “I understand the need to take Barry by surprise, but I really don’t like lying to Carmen and Trina. Joaquin said Carmen cried when she heard I was no longer human.”

“They’ll understand when they hear why we kept the truth from them, sweetheart.” Jeremy reached around and rubbed her knee. “It’s more important to out Barry and protect Cristían. You are the only one who can take him by surprise. You’ll guard Cristían well.”

“What if I can’t change back to human again?” She gripped his hand. “I’m afraid.”

“Me too.” Jeremy squeezed her fingers. “I know you can do it, though.”

“How do you know? How can you be sure?” Unshed tears glistened in her sage green eyes.

Cristían caught her gaze in the mirror. “Because we wish it, my queen.”

She eased away at the declaration, chin high, eyes clear, resolve etched on her fine features. A shimmer surrounded her. It dissipated with the sound of tiny chimes in the wind, and Lupe was a cat once more. With a trilled *brrrow*, she hopped into Jeremy’s lap.

Housing tracts gave way to more elusive homes as Cristían followed Joaquin and Wyatt up the mountain. Soon even those dwindled to nothing. Wildfires had scarred the land. Few trees survived. Hints of green peeked through the black ash. Cristían didn’t think the stench would ever go away. The lack of foliage made the house at the top of the mountain stick out. They were lucky it had been spared destruction, but they’d also been smart and cleared a one-hundred-foot safety zone around the place.

The rectangular house hugged the land. The sloping tile roof provided deep shading all around the porch. Thick walls kept the climate inside perfect year-round. Rooms for every clan member, common rooms too. Here, they could explore the night in jaguar form without fear. Stretch, chase, mate, and hunt. The fires had taken that all away. Time would bring it all back. Time healed everything in nature or helped rewrite it.

A chill raced down Cristían’s spine.

“How in the world is Steven’s team going to hide here, when there’s nothing to hide behind?” Jeremy asked.

“They're familiar with the area, remember?” Cristian waved his hand to the right. “They have property several miles in that direction. It's how we initially crossed paths. They know what they need to do.”

He turned left onto the winding asphalt drive and waited while Joaquin pushed the privacy gate open. Posted signs declared *NO TRESPASSING, PRIVATE PROPERTY, VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED*. What the signs didn't say was there had been a time or two the jaguars had toyed with trespassers before allowing them to “escape” in fear for their lives. *Ah...the good ole days*. He smiled to himself as they drove through, then hopped out to secure the gate once more.

By now those inside would have heard the *ding-ding-ding* indicating someone had come through the gate. Morning sunlight glinted off glass when a door ahead opened. Cristian hoped it wasn't Barry with a rifle trained on them. A few seconds later, he saw Trina's white hair and protruding stomach. She lifted a wave their way.

“God, she's huge,” Jeremy said. “Shouldn't she be in bed?”

“She wouldn't do anything to jeopardize those babies.” Cristian laughed lightly. “I'm sure she's allowed to stretch her legs a bit. She's probably been worried.” Trina's blue eyes tracked Wyatt's SUV. Cristian swore he saw her heave a sigh of relief. Wyatt parked and exited the vehicle in one motion. He strode toward her, arms wide, then drew her as close as the babies inside her allowed, and walked her back inside.

“I wish he'd get back in the vehicle and get her away from here,” Jeremy muttered.

“Let's just get this over quickly and safely.” Carmen and Trina had been whisked to safety with little word about why. He knew they'd been worried sick. Then to hear a cleaned-up version of events from their husbands late last night... Well, neither woman was stupid. They had to realize there was more to the story.

Joaquin waited for as long as it took Cristian to park, then marched inside to his wife and children. He and Wyatt had one job in all this—make sure Carmen, the babies, and Trina were safe. Now would be a good time for some of those premature contractions Trina had been having. It'd be the perfect excuse to at least get her out of the house.

Lupe hopped to the ground and trotted ahead of them. She waited, tail flicking, at the door. Cristian wrapped his fingers around the handle and sent his feelers out, trying to judge the

atmosphere within. He heard the babies giggling and prayed that was a good sign. Tension crackled from the room the instant he opened the door.

Trina now lay propped on the light brown pillowed sofa. Her feet rested in Wyatt's lap. Neither spoke that Cristían could hear. He was beginning to wonder if they'd found a way to communicate privately. If so, he'd love to have the secret.

The babies—Rose and Kara—were on a blanket before them, their indulgent parents hovering over them. Cristían loved the joy on Carmen's and Joaquin's faces when they played with the girls. How could anyone not smile at those unrestrained giggles? Lupe tumbled into their midst, and the girls howled with laughter at her antics. She indulged them and chased her tail.

“Oh, my friend, you always know just what to do.” Trina rubbed her belly.

“You would have made a wonderful mother.” Carmen pressed her fingers against quivering lips and closed her eyes. Joaquin wrapped a hug around her and kissed her temple.

Lupe jumped up and twined her body around the couple; then she hopped up next to Trina and rubbed her cheek over Trina's belly. Purrs filled the air, scattering the tension.

It returned with Barry and a tray of coffee mugs he carried. Heavy bags drooped under his red-rimmed eyes. Still, he managed a smirk for Lupe.

“Hello, puss.” He set the tray on the low table.

Lupe glared at him and growled. Cristían didn't need a secret language to know what she was saying: *let's get this over with and defeat the bastard*. He couldn't agree more. Then the girls laughed, and a look passed over Barry's face that was filled with so much love...

Cristían sank into the depths of the nearest chair. Lupe was by his side in a flash. Jeremy stood behind the sofa. The girls were near their parents. Everyone guarded as much as possible. Violence and anger had created the situation. Cristían realized patience, understanding, and time were the only things that would heal it.

“I'm sorry, Barry.”

Surprise widened Barry's eyes; suspicion narrowed them once more.

“I'm sorry that I didn't consider your fears, your concerns, your dedication to the clan. I'm sorry that I put you in a situation where you felt you had no choice but to kill me. That was my

fault. However, in your quest to save us all, *your* actions created the accident and changes you fought so hard to prevent.”

“What?” Barry choked on the word.

“When you activated the transmission to the microchip, it generated a small electric surge. The static arced, causing the explosion, and created what Jeremy, Lupe, and I now are. If you hadn't interfered, it never would have happened. Our experiments were failures until that spark of life. Do you care that good came of it?”

Barry stared, slack-jawed.

Cristian stroked his hand down Lupe's back, calming her rage, strengthening his resolve to handle this without conflict. “I don't understand why you felt the need to hunt me down in the dark of night, hiding in the bushes. I'm disappointed things had gotten to the point you no longer considered me jaguar enough to meet face-to-face. When did you realize it wasn't me you shot?”

His wild gaze flashed over Cristian's body.

“Ah, you didn't know.” He nodded. “You shot Steven Bernard. But again, due to that, we were able to isolate and destroy a virus that had been plaguing the mountain lions. Wyatt and Joaquin are working with Steven now to integrate their people into our institute.”

The news sagged Barry's shoulders. He looked beaten. Or to quote Lupe, defeated.

“Your motives were pure, misguided but pure. Your methods...” Cristian slowly shook his head. “You've been an asset to this clan forever, and now...”

“What do we do, Barry?” Wyatt asked softly. “What do we do when we can no longer trust our most trustworthy?”

Tears trickled down Barry's face, unrestrained. “I want to go home.”

Carmen touched his leg. “This is our home.”

He didn't look down, just slowly shook his head. “Not mine. I fit in this world as long as I had a purpose. That purpose was fulfilled a year ago. From the beginning, all I wanted was to free the world of skinwalkers and return home. And yet I remained here. I thought, 'Then there must be more, and that's why I'm still here.'” He glanced down at Cristian. “I thought you were the threat. It seemed clear. The chips were the perfect solution. I gave you every chance, the benefit of the doubt, but you forced my hand when you told me what you intended for Frieda.

Even that simple act went so horribly wrong. My controller broke when Frieda knocked me out. I've been trying ever since to fix it. It's been stuck in this escalating feedback loop I can't stop or control."

He rubbed his bloodshot eyes. "I just want to go home. Even if there's nothing left, I would rather live there...alone...knowing that I'd finally gotten back part of the life that was once mine."

Barry glanced from one to the other. "Don't you understand? Don't any of you understand?"

A ripple of energy surged under Cristían's hand. Lupe sat on the arm of the chair, her long hair tumbled over her shoulders. Cristían drew the afghan from the back of the chair around to cover her.

Lupe curled her fingers around the edges of the afghan and tucked it closed. "I understand. You want to go into the wild."

"Yes." Surprise lit his eyes. "Yes, that's exactly what I want." Eyes swimming with tears, he stumbled out the back door.

"We still don't have that weapon," Jeremy whispered.

Trina grunted. "It's under me. He stored it beneath the cushions when we got here. I've been lying on it ever since. He's been too focused on fixing that controller to care." She snorted. "All this time we thought he was freaked out over his cell phone not working."

"That's my girl." Wyatt leaned over her bulk and kissed her.

"Someone should follow him." Even as Jeremy said the words, he was moving in that direction. Cristían and Joaquin followed.

Barry stood on the back patio, gazing at the blackened landscape beyond. His clothes were scattered across the wooden deck. He lifted his nose to the air, then snorted. "Ah, I see. I can't blame you. I wouldn't trust me either. After all, I no longer trusted you." He shifted into his black jaguar and leaped off the deck.

He zipped across the yard in long, sleek strides. Muscles rippled beneath his glossy coat. Sunlight heightened the darker rosettes camouflaged within his fur. He ran, tail out, legs stretching...straight for the armed mountain lions surrounding the perimeter.

“No!” Cristían ran after him, tearing clothes off as he went, in the hope he could shift and catch up.

Footsteps beat up behind him—Joaquin and Jeremy trying to do the same. By now Wyatt would know and be in the chase. Barry snarled, then roared as he neared the line of men. Steven stood, rifle braced against his shoulder. His guard popped up from other locations and ashen earth crunched beneath their boots.

“Stop!” Steven ordered. “Stop now, or I’ll shoot!”

Barry lunged for him, claws and fangs bared.

Steven fell back, rifle aimed at the cat mere feet from killing him. “Stop! Stop!” A blast propelled Barry backward a good ten feet.

Steven scrambled to his feet and lifted the rifle again. Barry shifted into human form. Blood poured from his chest. Cristían gouged a wound open in his arm and knelt by his side.

“No.” Barry grunted and tried to push him away. “Let me go. Don’t save me. I want to go home. Please, let me go home.”

Joaquin curled his fingers over Cristían’s shoulder and squeezed.

“He came right at me.” Steven lowered the weapon and put the safety on. “I had no choice.”

“We know.” Jeremy patted his back.

Wyatt knelt at Barry’s other side and lifted his hand. “Good-bye, my friend.”

Cristían watched Barry’s blood seep into the ground. He’d never felt more helpless.

Then, with his last few breaths, Barry made one final sacrifice for his clan—he shifted into jaguar form, so there would be no police investigation to worry about.

His soul had finally found freedom. Cristían wished it could have been sooner.

* * * *

Cristían sat on the back deck watching the stars. Lupe huddled between him and Jeremy against the night chill. After the long day they’d had, Cristían appreciated the cool air. Jaguars and mountain lions had worked together to dig deep graves for Barry and Frieda. A joint team of medical personnel had harvested Frieda’s organs for further study on how the virus may have

affected her. Cristian didn't know how her clan intended to cover up her death, and he didn't ask. The jaguars had their own methods of dealing with such things.

Cremation would have been the best method. They could have found some way to smuggle Barry's ashes over the border and back to their ancestral land. However, no facility existed that would cremate a jaguar without a hell of a lot of questions. They'd have seventy million organizations up the clan's ass in the blink of an eye for having an endangered species in their possession.

The constant watch for wildfires made it impossible to cremate Barry on a funeral pyre, even on their own property. With the graves on private land and a good ten feet deep, there was little chance the bodies would be discovered. The property would always remain in clan hands, and under normal circumstances, the jaguars were very long-lived.

They topped off the day with grilled chicken, steak, and vegetables both clans had worked to prepare, bonding them as a unit in life and death. The babies had been the center of attention—their favorite place—and were down for the night. With Sophie fluttering over her all day, Trina hadn't had to lift a finger. Wyatt and Joaquin sat with Steven and his people making further plans. Carmen and Trina were doing something similar with the women.

It was just him, Lupe, and Jeremy, sitting in the night, watching the wild.

"We're going to reinstall the tracking chips in everyone's arms." Jeremy swallowed the last of his beer and set the bottle aside. "Steven's crew wants them too."

"Probably should have gone with the arm in the first place." Cristian traced circles over Lupe's knee. "Live and learn." They'd thought the chance of losing their heads was less remote than losing a limb. "I wonder when Barry figured out how to alter the chips?"

"I should have been suspicious when he and I were planning them," Jeremy said. "He acquired everything we needed."

"There was no way to anticipate something like this. We didn't know what was in his mind." They'd been too wrapped up in their own minds.

"I knew how he felt"—Lupe brushed her hands over her arms—"trapped in one world, desperately wanting another and not knowing how to have it. If I'd noticed sooner, maybe I could have helped him. I don't know." She shrugged.

Jeremy wrapped a hug around her. "Sweetheart, you can't see what others are determined to hide. Some of us spend years hiding from ourselves as much as we hide from someone else."

Cristian rubbed some warmth into her thigh. "Hiding became second nature to us. Hide from the threat. Hide from the world and civilizations growing around us. Barry was dedicated to the task, goal oriented, focused... We all were. Then it was done. The threat was gone. Looking back, I realize each of us was affected in different ways. The job was over, the focus lost. The twins helped Joaquin and Carmen adjust after six months of hell being apart. Wyatt found Trina, and now their babies. I threw myself into resurrecting Rose and was fortunate to find you two in my life. Barry continued to look for threats."

"I constantly wonder just how many shape-shifters there are out there doing the same thing." Jeremy drew circles on Lupe's bicep.

She burrowed deeper against him. "Maybe the clans can work together to find them."

"If anyone can find them, Jeremy can." Cristian bent forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Maybe it's best to just leave them alone." He watched a shooting star skid across the sky.

Jeremy pointed out the smoke trail for Lupe. "We call those planet skippers. They look close, but they're not. It's just an illusion."

"I have so much to learn. I'm glad I have such great teachers."

Cristian glanced back at the sadness in her voice. "Something wrong?"

Lupe's sigh made him want to cry. "I had a long talk with Carmen and Trina. I'm not having babies. They said shifter women can't shift when they're pregnant. It's not possible. I shifted today."

"Oh, sweetheart." They cuddled her between them.

"I was so certain." She sniffled. "I saw the gold stars come down on us. They went deep inside me."

"We saw them too." Jeremy combed her hair from her tear tracks.

"You did?"

"We did." Cristian kissed her behind the ear. "As far as we're concerned...if our queen wishes for babies, we will have our babies."

Jeremy nuzzled from the other side. “Because there is one thing we have definitely learned from you... Wishing does make it so.”

Light beamed in Lupe's eyes. “It *does*!”

“How 'bout we go inside and get all warmed up?” He flicked her earlobe under his tongue. “Work on getting those babies we all want so much.”

Lupe's sultry laughter went straight to his groin. “Ooo, I like that idea. Will anyone be needing blowjobs?”

Jeremy tickled a finger down her diminutive cleavage. “Maybe...you?”

“I like that even more.” The purr in her voice did things to Cristian the universe couldn't hope to reproduce. But then...he'd known that all along.

 THE END 

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Caitlyn Willows

No one is more surprised than erotic romance author Caitlyn Willows at the direction life has taken her. Blessed (or cursed) with a vivid imagination, Caitlyn weaves deep emotions and sizzling sensuality into her action-filled stories. Believing life is to be lived and felt, not merely watched, Caitlyn delivers real-to-life characters in unforgettable tales of love, adventure, and always steamy passion. She lives in the beautiful desert of Southern California with her husband (a genealogist) and the animals she loves.