



MANDY M ROTH

BEST  
INTENTIONS



GHOST  
CATS

SHANNON M. HARRIS, LIT

*Even a wrong turn can be right.*

*A Ghost Cats Story*

Lily arrives at Thioshpaye Bar and Cabins looking for room, board...and a man. The one standing behind the counter ought to be perfect—she's not going to find anyone more gorgeous. But she's only looking for a one-night stand, and the connection that sizzles between them tells her she could spend a lifetime in his arms.

Brayen's cougar-shifter eyes must be deceiving him. Humans aren't supposed to be able to see the building, much less waltz right through the door. But he can tell that Lily is special—and sees through the bravery that masks her inner vulnerability. His pack won't welcome a human, but when Lily is nearly attacked by wolf shifters, Brayen knows she's his to protect—and love. At least for tonight.

Before the night is over, Lily gets more than she bargained for—a taste of love she never knew could exist—and can never have. Faced with an empty bed in the morning, Brayen realizes he's lost the one thing he never hoped to find. His true mate.

Finding her again will take a miracle...and could cost them both everything.

*This book has been previously published.*

Warning: Cat-shifter nookie in some very wet places. Yes, it's what you're thinking.

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# Best Intentions

*Mandy M. Roth*

# Dedication

Dad, you were taken too young and will be greatly missed. I love you.

# Chapter One

Lillian pulled up alongside the Thioshpaye Cabins and waited for the courage to get out of the vehicle. The thought of what she'd come to do still made her slightly nauseous. She wasn't the type of girl who slept around and she certainly wasn't the type who cheated, but she knew what had to be done. Besides, Jack had been the one to file for divorce, not her. He'd been the one who decided he couldn't do it anymore. That he needed space. Sure, he begged her to forgive his error in judgment and take him back, but there was something she needed to attend to first.

Gripping the wheel, her knuckles turning white, Lily glanced at the bar, *Igmú*, adjacent to the cabins. A sign, resembling a stretched hide with a painting on it, clearly spelled out the bar's name. It looked weathered and old, yet new all at the same time. Great care had gone into the details of both the cabins and the bar. Someone had painstakingly assured Native American themes were consistent throughout. The entire atmosphere was different here. She'd sensed it the minute she'd pulled off the highway and driven down the long winding lane to the parking lot.

*You can do this*, she told herself, chancing a quick glance at the bar, steeling her will as best she could. She'd come with a mission. If she turned back now, she'd lose her chance at filling the ache of her empty arms.

Renee, her best friend, had told her she could find plenty of sexy men willing to shack up for a night or two at the bar, no questions asked, and that's exactly what she needed.

No muss, no fuss.

She dropped her head back, pushing it against the headrest. Her thoughts ran faster than she could keep up with. A strange tingling in her chest seemed to be a cross between adrenaline and guilt.

*You can do this*, she repeated, her mantra nearly burned into her brain. The first step was the hardest—getting out of the car. She managed it, just barely. Once out, she hovered near her vehicle, debating on whether or not to go in and do what she'd spent so long planning. Gulping, she made her way towards the entrance.

It didn't appear to be a dive and that surprised her. She'd expected the entire place to be flea-bitten and crawling with lowlifes. Renee's stories about the happenings at the bar afterhours had given her that impression. The place not only looked like it was well kept; it looked like it turned a decent profit.

She was a little disappointed her grandmother wasn't alive to see the place. She would have loved it. She'd been full-blooded Lakota and had instilled a respect for the culture in Lily at an early age. The painstaking detail in every direction Lily looked would have certainly pleased her grandmother.

She pushed open the door to the office and stepped inside, her attention still on the bar next door. The scent of varying spices filled the air with a pleasing, welcoming aroma. It too reminded her of the days she'd visit her grandmother. Those days still held a special place in her heart. It was when everything was simple and right in the world.

Nothing made sense anymore.

"Can I help you?" came a deep voice, causing her lower stomach to swirl with something akin to need.

Shocked by her physical response, Lily glanced at the man behind the counter and drew in a deep breath. He was stunning. From what she could see, he was made of pure muscle. Not an ounce of fat on him. Her tongue darted out and over her lower lip, desperate for moisture that wasn't there. The white T-shirt he wore showed off his sun-kissed skin. Sandy blond locks fell just below his shoulders and wisps of sun-bleached white strands ran through it. It was clear to see he enjoyed the outdoors and that they, in turn, had been kind to him.

"You all right?" he asked, cocking a light brown eyebrow. Stark blue eyes stared out at her from under his thick lashes.

It was too easy to picture those eyes reflected in a younger version of the man—a tiny bundle of joy that she could love for the rest of her days.

*No. Not him. Someone I'm not attracted to like this. Not him.*

Her pulse sped as she inched towards the counter. Each step was a step on the path of no return. She knew as much, yet she put one foot in front of the other and moved forward. "I need a cabin for the weekend."

"You by yourself?" he inquired, standing, taking her breath away. His six-foot-plus body was pure perfection.

*Oh Gawd, he's even more gorgeous than I thought.*

Brayen's heart raced as he watched the tiny brunette walk into the office. He rarely got excited over a woman upon first glance but she did it for him. His dick had hardened the minute she entered and he wasn't sure it would ever go down. Her curves were where they needed to be and she actually had enough meat on her bones to not look fifteen. He hated the way women starved themselves trying to be a size zero. This one was perfect, not too big and not too small. Little on the short side, though.

Her green gaze locked onto him and he wondered if his face was as red as it felt. He'd never been prone to getting embarrassed—this was a first. The way she stared at him made him both nervous and excited all at the same time. He hated to interrupt her but she didn't appear to be making any headway in the introducing-herself department.

The scent of her arousal filled his nostrils and he had to close his eyes a moment to prevent her from seeing them change colors. She wasn't a shifter. He could tell by her scent, yet here she stood in his establishment. The shaman—Running Elk—had said normal humans could not see the hotel or bar—they'd see it as abandoned and continue down the highway. He'd paid good money for the old man to work his magik on the joint and wasn't happy to find out this little one found her way past it. Didn't matter how fuckable she looked. She wasn't one of them. Therefore, she needed to leave.

"You want a cabin for the weekend, huh?"

"Yes...yes, please, if there's one available," she added softly.

Brayen eyed her closely. She didn't really look the rustic cabin type. Seemed more like the kind of lady who preferred the finer things in life. His head said to send her on her merry way. His cock had other things in mind and sadly, it ruled in most matters. "Sure, I've got room, but wouldn't you be more comfortable in the city? It's only another fifteen to twenty minutes from here."

Her head snapped up and something flashed in her green eyes, anger perhaps. She moved her jaw around and Brayen could smell her body chemistry changing. Yep, she was good and pissed. He smiled at her feistiness. "So I take it that rather sexy pout means you'd rather be here, in my fine establishment."

She huffed. "Sexy pout?"

"I figured it sounded better than hissy fit. We can call it whatever you want but let's be honest. You want to be here."

For a second, he thought she might protest. He almost wished she would. She opened her mouth and closed it again. A curt nod was followed by the clearing of her throat. "Yes. Can I have a room or not?"

"Sure thing," he said, already knowing it was a bad idea. Still, he couldn't stop himself. He glanced in the direction of the parking lot. "Need any help with your bags?"

"I can manage on my own," she replied, each word clipped. Her strong will only made him want to touch her more. He could just imagine what her expression would be when she was coming.

*I bet she's a screamer.*

He hardened more, his cock pushing at the confines of his jeans. He palmed it, blatantly adjusting himself. A sly smile curved his lips as he noticed her noticing his actions. She gulped and he snickered. Hot damn. She was innocent, like a little lamb in the den of a lion, or in his case, a cougar.

Her heart rate increased and his keen senses afforded him a whiff of her sweet smelling sweat. Brayen had to take a second to collect his thoughts and pull back on the beast uncoiling deep within him. It very much wanted to come out and play with the newest addition. But fucking a human was a bad idea. They



were fragile and tended to break easily. A shifter's appetite for rough sex was well known within the supernatural community. Just like the animals they shared their genetic makeup with, sex could be wild, dangerous and thrilling.

Clenching his fists, he held back, refraining from going to her and seeing if her skin was as soft as it appeared to be. "Tell ya what. I'll give you a cabin for the weekend for half price if you let me carry your bags to your room."

She balked. "Money's not an issue. I can pay your fee and I can carry my own bags, Mr....?"

"Name is Brayen but Bray will do in a pinch, Miss....?"

"Lily will do for me," she said, still glaring at him.

Damn. Even her dirty looks were sexy. His cock throbbed, wanting to be free of his jeans, and he silently cursed himself for wearing a snug-fitting pair. If she glanced down, she'd see exactly what her independent woman routine was doing to him.

Exhaling slowly through his mouth, Brayen struggled to find an inner peace long enough to get her into her room and then get himself into an icy cold shower. Though he'd probably spend the entire time jacking off to her image anyways so he wasn't sure the temperature of the shower much mattered. Might be better to blow a load right up front and get the tiny spitfire out of his mind.

"Lily it is then." He moved from behind the counter and came to a stop before her. She was so much smaller than him that she only came to his chest. He wanted to pick her up and see how well she fit against his body but he didn't. He knew better. Already the little thing had a pull over him he didn't much care for. Knowing how she felt in his arms would do nothing in the way of stopping that.

Just one night.

He grunted, liking the way his mind worked. Maybe one night would do it. She reeked with desire for him but his bet was on her being cold as ice if he tried anything. It was a shame too. He hadn't been this attracted to anyone in his life. His condition prevented him from getting close to too many people. Accidentally shifting when he lost control of his moods was a very real possibility, though he had more control than others over the beast within.

He took a deep breath and savored the sweet scent of peaches. He wasn't sure if she'd just eaten one or if it was some sort of lotion, but it drove him mad with desire. He stretched his shoulders and started for the door. The need to put some distance between them was great. "Let's get you settled in. It's getting late and tomorrow is the full moon."

He brushed past Lily and she tensed. The aroma of her arousal hit him again, causing him to stagger backwards. She grabbed his arm and it took everything in him not to throw her to the floor and fuck her then and there. Shaking, he heaved in large gasps of air, fighting as the beast within him uncoiled and took note of Lily. Instant approval radiated from it and Brayen knew if he dared to let it out, he'd do something he could never take back.

He'd not only fuck her. He'd lay claim to her.

"Are you okay?" she inquired, sliding her tiny hand up his arm more. The action, while innocent, sent fire to his groin. White teeth flashed as he considered sinking his hands into her dark hair and yanking her against his body. Already he could almost taste her cream on his tongue. She'd be sweet heaven he was sure.

Pure male heat rolled off him as he glanced down at her hand upon his arm. A cunning smile slid over his face slow at first. Her gaze locked on him and her fingers dug at his arm as her breathing increased.

At least he wasn't flying solo in the attraction department. Clearly, Lily felt something for him. If the intensity of the pull was as extreme for her as it was him, their joining would be explosive. He wondered if she was a screamer or if she climaxed silently.

*Fuck. I want to find out.*

"Are you okay?" she repeated with less conviction in her voice.

"I'm better now, thanks."

She rolled her eyes and pulled away from him. "Can I just get the key to my cabin now?"

"In a hurry?" he asked, wanting to know more about the mysterious female.

"As a matter of fact, I am. I want to get a bite to eat at the bar. They serve food, right?"

Brayen's gut clenched. They'd serve her there if she wasn't careful. The establishment was crawling with shifters of various kinds. None of which were something a human female needed to be alone with. There was no way in hell he was letting her set foot in there without an escort. "They sure do. Can I buy you dinner?"

Her gaze narrowed on him. "Why?"

"Why not?" He bent and put his face dangerously close to hers. Her full, rose red lips tempted him, taking all his strength not to clamp his mouth down on hers. If he dared, he'd fuck her here and now.

Lily stood there, gazing into the handsome stranger's crisp blue eyes, and had to fight to concentrate on what he'd said to her. She caught the words *buy dinner* and that was it. She tried to look away from him but couldn't. All she could do was shake her head slightly.

She hadn't intended to find anyone she was this attracted to. The most she'd hoped for was to find a man who at least caught her eye and then spend the weekend fucking his brains out and leave—no strings, no phone numbers, no contact again.

The attraction she felt for this man, Brayen, was more than she'd hoped for and more than she felt comfortable with.

*Use your head, Lily. You need to be able to walk away from this man and not look back. Jack is who you love. He's the only man you've ever loved,* she scolded herself as she stared at Brayen's lips.

He stayed locked in one spot for what seemed like an eternity. The door to the office opened, bringing with it a strong gust of cold wind. Lily gasped as the wind seemed to encircle her, thrusting her forward. She ran right into Brayen's lips with her own, her mouth parted slightly from the yelp. She went to close her mouth and felt his warm tongue invade her. Her insides flared to life and her inner thighs pulsed with need. She put her hands on his chest and pushed back from him.

Brayen glanced at her a moment and then around the office. Lily looked too. She felt someone or something touching her back, before it pushed her into Brayen again, but there was no one to be seen. Confused, she took a step towards Brayen. Fear danced up her spine. "Something's here...behind me."

He pulled her close, his body large, muscular, protective. She shuddered against him, still glancing around the office. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

Brayen ran his hand up her back slowly. "It's okay."

Her gaze lifted upwards, colliding with his. She saw him dipping his head and knew to pull away but couldn't. Her body seemed locked in place, wanting what she knew was about to come.

Another kiss.

Brayen didn't disappoint. His lips feathered over hers and he eased his tongue into her mouth. Whimpering, her tongue followed suit, dipping into his mouth as well. The kiss was intoxicating, drugging almost. Her entire body relaxed against the man and she knew in that moment she'd give herself freely to him—without worry or reservation.

The kiss intensified and in the back of her mind, she knew better than to let it. This wasn't supposed to happen. She wasn't supposed to have this kind of attraction to another man. She was supposed to grin and bear it, getting through with what had to be done. Not this.

Not Brayen.

Lily found strength she didn't know she possessed and she jerked back, her hand going instantly to her swollen lips. His sweet taste was still there, lingering, letting her know what he offered.

She wanted more.

Needed more but couldn't dare.

Wind whipped around her once more and she yelped, her eyes wide with fear.

"Don't mind them. The spirits rarely do more than kick up a wind. They must have thought we needed to get a bit closer. If I were you, I'd follow their advice. They don't tend to mislead anyone." He put his hand out to her and she took a step back, afraid that if his skin touched hers she'd take him to her bed. The only man she intended to sleep with was one she felt nothing for. Not this one.

Nervous, Lily glanced out at her car and back at Brayen.

He closed his eyes slowly and shook his head. "Listen, Lily. You don't have to be afraid of me."

"Who the hell would be afraid of you, Cougar?" a husky voice bellowed from behind her.

Lily jumped and spun around to find a tall man standing in the doorway—filling it completely. Whatever was in the water around the area sure produced hardy stock. She couldn't remember a time this much delicious man meat was in the same room. The newcomer obviously had Native American blood in him. A good amount. He was either full-blooded or damn close. His dark hair reminded her of Jack's a bit and guilt for why she was here trickled through her.

The man's dark brown gaze fell on her as he stopped in his tracks. "Well, what do we have here?"

Brayen stepped in front of her quickly, the action seeming as though he was shielding her from the newcomer's view. "Mason, this is Lily. She's just here for the weekend."

Mason peered around Brayen and smiled widely. She was still trying to get over how gorgeous Brayen was. Adding another hunk to the mix was almost too much. Lily grinned and extended her hand. Brayen stiffened and for a minute, she thought he might slap her hand away from Mason. He didn't.

"Hi, I'm Lillian. My friends all call me Lily."

Mason took her hand in his and brought it to his lips slowly. There was an air about him that said he knew his way around a woman with his eyes closed and both hands tied behind his back. "Then I hope I get to call you Lily."

He was a fine specimen of a man and the fact she felt little when he kissed her hand proved he should be the one she spent the weekend with. There was no question on whether or not he'd be good in bed. The way he carried himself screamed as much. She'd have a little fun, get what she came for and push the memory from her mind.

Her gaze slid towards Brayen and the pull to him intensified. She fought it.

No attachments, she reminded herself.

"You here by yourself?" Mason asked, helping to stop the rushing sensation to go to Brayen.

Brayen growled and Mason just grinned at him.

Lily nodded and took her hand back slowly. "Yes, I'm here for the weekend. Needed to get away for a little while."

"Everyone eventually does," Mason said knowingly.

Lily pushed past Brayen and stood between the two men. Each was over six foot and dwarfed her. Thoughts of an erotic sandwich filled her head and she had to shake them off. An affair with two men was definitely not something she was up for. One was going to do her in and she technically wasn't cheating. She and her husband were legally separated because of his choosing—not hers. The semantics of it all did little to ease her guilt.

"Do you think you could give me a hand with my bags?" she asked Mason.

"It would be my pleasure."

Brayen's jaw twitched with rage. How could she stand there and flirt with Mason right in front of him? She wasn't attracted to Mason, at least not in the way she'd been with him. His heightened senses made him very aware of her body's chemical reactions and there was no way she wanted Mason as much as she wanted him.

*I sound like I'm in junior high.*

Lily walked out to her car and Mason turned to look at him. "You all right? You're not thinking anything serious can happen with her, are you? She's so human that I almost choked on it. How the hell did she find this place? My grandfather said he put a veil on it. She shouldn't have been able to wander in here. I'll put a call in to him in the morning and get him out here to repeat the ritual."

"No," Brayen said, lifting his hand. "She felt the spirits of the land rush through. She's human, but some powerful blood runs through her veins. That's how she found us. Leave Running Elk alone. He's not as young as he used to be."

Mason laughed. "The man will outlive us. He's got to be pushing two hundred now."

"With as slow as we age, I'm betting over that," Brayen said, peeking over Mason's shoulder at Lily.

Mason smiled and followed his gaze. "Cougs, if you like her, just tell me and I'll keep my distance. Wouldn't want to piss the kitty off." Mason growled as he wrinkled his nose.

Brayen rolled his eyes and laughed at his old friend. "I think I'm in love."

*Love? Why the hell would I say that, even in jest?*

Love wasn't a word that was even in his vocabulary. Joking or not. Or, at least it hadn't been until recently. Like Lily-kind-of-recent.

"You just met her and she's human," Mason said, ever the voice of reason. "You don't know anything about her and I'm betting she has no fucking idea you can shape-shift into a cougar. That, buddy, isn't love you're feeling. It's a stiffy wanting to be buried in that hot lil' pussy. Use her to scratch the itch and be done with her. Humans aren't for our kind. You know it and so do I."

He was still stuck on the proclamation of love. He'd never, in all his years, brought up the L-word. It just wasn't done. Yet here it was, rolling off his tongue as if he used the word daily. He worried his jaw with his hand, unsure what was happening to him, but knowing enough to understand it was big.

"What are you thinking?" Mason questioned, his gaze as troubled as Brayen's.

"That I'm in a boatload of shit."

Pursing his lips, Mason nodded. "Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. What are you going to do about it?"

"You think fucking her out of my system will really work?"

The blank stare Mason leveled on him was answer enough.

*Shit.*

## Chapter Two

Lily applied a thin layer of lip-gloss and double-checked her outfit as she fluffed her towel-dried hair. She hoped the tiny black dress didn't scream sleazy but in truth, she was desperate to find a man to sleep with her tonight, so the hooker get-up was completely in order.

She turned slightly and nodded in approval at the low-cut back of the dress. It just missed showing her butt. She slipped on her thigh-highs and heels and headed out the door. The cool night air smacked her bare skin and she cursed herself for wearing something so skimpy.

*I'll not only get laid, I'll get pneumonia too.*

She wasn't even ten paces from her door when Brayen stepped out and into her path, nearly scaring her to death. Her hand came to her throat and she took a calming breath. His good-old-boy smile eased her fears.

"I'm buying you dinner, remember," he said, bending his head to see her better. The well-fitting navy shirt he now had on drew attention to his blue gaze. The man was stunning. A sight to behold. He seemed oblivious to it which only served to turn her on more. Her nerve laden body sung with desire for him to be above her, easing in and out her. She stomped on the thoughts, forcing her gaze from his. "I, umm, I'd rather eat alone."

His jaw jutted out, his gaze tight as he stepped closer to her. "Well, I'd rather have company when I eat so consider yourself trumped."

She blinked incredulously. "You're a bold one, aren't you?"

"I might be used to getting my way," he said, his hand coming out to her.

Against her better judgment, Lily placed her hand in his. Heat flared up her arm as his fingers laced through hers. His expression reflected the attraction she felt for him and she knew if she took a step with him, he would be the man she ended up with. He tugged lightly, seeming to sense her indecision.

"Do I have a date for dinner?" he asked, stepping closer to her.

Nodding, she covered the remaining distance between them. "Yes."

*Yes?*

Lily struggled to surface through the fog that had become her mind. No attachments. It's what she'd drilled into herself before making this daring journey yet here she was, handing her soul to the devil for the taking.

She raked her gaze over Brayen.

Oh, what a devil he was.

Alarm bells went off within her but she squelched them, the lure of the man before her too much to deny. He lifted their joined hands and traced a finger down her cheek, neck and upper chest. She arched to him, wanting more.

His lips found her ear. "We should eat."

"Yes," she whispered, her lips grazing his jaw. Her nipples hardened and before she knew it, she was planting the tiniest of kisses on his jaw.

He smiled as he turned his head, his lips now directly above hers. "You feel the pull between us, don't you?"

She nodded in agreement but somehow managed to push out a lie. "N-no."

His manly chuckle made her weak in the knees. "Interesting response. Not sure I buy it though." He kissed the back of her hand, his lips scorching her tender skin. "Now, about that dinner I promised you."

"The what and where?" she asked, lost in the moment and rapture of the man she was fast beginning to suspect had bespelled her.

The edges of his sexy mouth slid upwards. "I'm planning to fill that belly of yours."

She stiffened. "What?"

"With food," he amended, though the suggestion of filling her with more still lingered. "There isn't a whole lot to you and I'd like to know you're good and ready for a long night."

She traced her thumb over his wrist. "Why is that?"

"Don't play games, Lily," he said sternly. "We both know where this is headed."

"Then we should skip dinner and go straight to my room," she supplied.

"We could—" he touched foreheads with her, "—but I want to spend time with you out of the bed as well as in it."

The air left her and she swooned in his arms. He smiled, dragging her against the expanse of his chest, his erection digging at her stomach. "Eat now. Play later," he said, as though he were trying to convince himself as much as her.

He led her towards the bar entrance, his arm slipping around her waist before his hand splayed over her stomach. He pushed the door open and kept her close to him. The first thing Lily noticed about the bar was how it was almost all male. The second was how their gazes didn't just linger on her. They seemed bolted to her. She stepped closer to Brayen, feeling safe near him.

He held her tighter, his lips finding her temple. "Let's eat, beautiful."

Nodding, she allowed him to lead her to the back corner booth. He positioned her so that no others could touch her and placed himself in their path. He nodded to the man behind the bar. "Can I get a menu for her?"

"Sure thing, boss."

Lily touched Brayen's hand. "Bray, I'll have whatever you pick for me."

"Trust me that much?" he asked, lifting a brow. "You hardly know me."

He was right. She didn't know him but she did trust him. She couldn't explain it. Didn't even want to try. "Pick for me."

He did and she was impressed with his choice. The chicken salad was something she'd have selected for herself. He went with a burger, done rare. When he was finished ordering, he focused on her.

Brayen could barely control the raging need coursing through his body. Lily was the single most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Her mannerisms were so ladylike, so schooled it was hard to believe she'd be caught dead in public with a man like him.

An animal.

He grabbed the front of his jeans, adjusting his cock. She caught the action and he felt no need to apologize for it. Instead, he winked. "He's excited and already ready for later."

The faintest of blushes stole across her cheeks. "Do this often?"

"Do what?"

"Inform women you just met that they will be sleeping with you later?"

"I'd answer that, but it would only serve to piss you off." He leaned back in his chair. He was the kind of guy who didn't mix words. When he needed release, he sought a woman out and told her what he wanted. She gave it to him and then he was done with her. It was that simple. Or had been. Nothing about Lily seemed cut and dry. "How about you? Enter into a dinner arrangement with a guy you just met, knowing full well you're going to be fucked later?"

She jerked as the word *fucked* fell from his lips. He winced, wanting it back. She was different from other women he used to sate his baser needs. While he would indeed fuck her, she wouldn't be just another fuck.

"Hey," he said, bending forward in an attempt to take her hand in his.

She pulled away. "Hmm?"

"You've never done this before, have you?" he asked, already knowing the answer. There was no way she made a habit of agreeing to bed men she just met. The cross between excitement and fear that seemed to radiate from her was telling enough. But an inner knowledge crept over him, alerting him to just how out of her element Lily was. He mentally chastised himself for not making more of an effort to wow her. He grabbed her wrist gently. "Lily, when I take you tonight, I'll give you pleasure like you've never known."

She closed her eyes. "This is wrong."

"Doesn't feel wrong to me," he supplied. "Feels pretty damn right."

"That's the problem," she confessed, holding his hand tightly. "It shouldn't feel right."



He wanted to press her as to why but knew better than to push. Already she looked to be on the verge of flight.

Their food came and they ate in silence, the awkwardness that had been hanging in the air between them seemed to dissipate. Before long, Brayen found himself telling Lily bits and pieces of his life—as much as he could anyway. He left out the big stuff, like the fact he wasn't human.

She smiled as he mentioned his mother's name. "That's funny."

"That her name was Rose?" he asked.

"No, that she was named after a flower and so am I."

The tie had been lost on him until she pointed it out. He grinned. "She'd have caught that too. And Lily, I think she'd have liked you."

"From what you've told me of her—" she paused, "—I'd have liked her as well."

"What about you?" He eyed her, realizing she'd barely said a word about herself or her family. "You from the area?"

"Yes and no," she confessed, seeming uncomfortable with the idea of sharing things about herself. "My father and grandmother are from near here."

"Really?"

She nodded. "Lakota and proud of it. Though, my father married a white woman so that diluted me somewhat."

It was interesting hearing her mention ties to the people of the area. Now that he really looked at her, he saw it in her. She was beautiful. Running Elk would approve of her as well.

Brayen jerked at the thought of needing Running Elk's permission for anything, let alone a woman. It wasn't as if he was planning to keep Lily around. He just wanted to spend the weekend getting to fuck every sweet ounce of her and then be done.

*Yeah, right.*

She sipped her drink and his cock throbbed with thoughts of those lips wrapped around it. He straightened in his seat once more, desperate for her to share something of herself, of her past, anything to keep his mind off sex.

"Are you close to your parents?" he asked.

She held tight to her glass. "I was. They died. My grandmother raised me after that and she recently passed as well."

"So you're alone?"

Her gaze darted away and her scent changed. She was hiding something or someone. Brayen leaned forward, his hand skating up her arm, making her shiver. "There isn't anyone else, is there?"

Her dark eyes widened and her pulse quickened. "W-what?"

"Do you," he stressed, "have someone else at home? A boyfriend maybe?"

She used her free hand to rub her ear as she took a deep breath. “No.”

It was a lie. He could smell it on her. That being said, he wanted to believe her only because he knew he was taking her to bed regardless. It wasn’t a case of no values. It was a case of his primal needs taking precedent over everything else, including a possible boyfriend.

“What about you?” Lily countered. “Do you have someone special?”

His snort caused her to stiffen again. Admitting to her that he only fucked women and then sent them on their way wasn’t exactly a brilliant move. Brayen slid closer to Lily’s seat, slipping his arm around her in the process. The males in the bar had taken too much of an interest in her. He twisted enough so that Lily couldn’t see his face but the rest of the bar could. Brayen let his eyes shift to amber, warning the others not to try anything foolish. He knew his scent had changed as well and they would pick up on as much. It wasn’t until he himself picked up on the changes that he realized exactly how his scent had changed.

*I’m radiating protective mate energy.*

The information stunned him to the point he stopped and took a large breath. His heart pounded madly and he thought for sure it would thump its way clean out of his chest.

It couldn’t be.

She couldn’t be.

All the *couldn’t be* in the world didn’t change the fact his body had responded in a way it never had before and that according to the way he was behaving, Lily was more than simply a fancy woman he wanted to romance into bed for the night.

Far more.

“Bray?” she asked, pulling him from the verge of hysterics.

He turned slowly back to face her, his palms sweaty and his chest fluttering. Her gaze held concern and her tiny hand darted out towards his arm. The minute her skin made contact with his, a low growl began to emanate from deep within him. Somehow he managed to stop it before it became full blown.

He’d heard other shifters make the noise in the past. Not often but enough to know exactly what it signified.

The starts of a verbal claiming.

She couldn’t be his true life mate. He didn’t buy into that crap Running Elk was always going on about. How every supernatural had a perfect someone. A person who complemented their soul completely. A person they were meant to love and be with for life. Only one person who they could reproduce with. Sure shifter males were genetically prone to want to take a mate. There was a hell of a difference between a mate and a true life mate. One existed. The other did not.

Lily caressed his arm gently and his conviction wavered. “Bray, are you okay? You’re burning up.”

He took a calming breath. “I’m good, beautiful. Just excited about getting to be in you soon.”

The edges of her lips slid upwards. “I’m excited too.”

Damn he wanted to kiss her. Hell, he wanted to throw everything off the table and fuck her right there, for all to see she was totally and completely his and his alone. It was far from something he'd do and that was the only thing that allowed him to relax and even remain near her.

Someone turned the jukebox on and Brayen nearly yelled for them to shut it off. Lily smiled and stood, her hand easing into his. "Let's dance."

Dance?

He lifted a brow. He didn't dance. Ever.

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her no. He couldn't. Brayen stood and pulled Lily in behind him as he walked towards the dance floor. The very empty dance floor. Most of the people in the bar knew him. Most feared and respected him. Seeing him trying to dance would shoot that respect and fear right in the ass.

Stiffly, he turned and dragged Lily against his frame, unsure exactly what he was supposed to be doing. Thankfully, she seemed to understand and helped to guide him to start with. Her hands went up and to the back of his neck and her breasts pressed against his chest. His hands naturally found her hips and his erection dug at her lower stomach. He knew he could learn to like dancing with her right real quick.

He moved slowly, their bodies fitting together perfectly, even with the height difference. Her head came to a rest on his chest and a fierce need to protect the tiny female in his arms was all consuming. He inhaled her scent.

Peaches.

As much as he wanted to fuck her, to know the feel of her sheath around his cock, he had to admit he enjoyed this—dancing with her. Simple yet still oddly erotic to him with a tenderness he wasn't even aware he was capable of.

The song ended and another began. They kept dancing, their bodies close. He could hear her heart beating and from the placement of her head on his chest, he knew she could hear his as well.

He brought a hand up and traced the backs of his knuckles over her cheek. She attempted to lift her head to look up at him but he cradled her head to him, keeping her in place. He knew if Lily dared make eye contact with him at the moment, she'd see what he'd been trying to hide since the start of the second song—his eyes had shifted colors. He'd regain control of them soon enough. For now, he just wanted to hold his woman.

He caught Mason's scent and knew his friend had entered the bar. He wasn't alone. Running Elk was next to him, a smug smile on the old man's face as he watched Brayen with Lily. Mason didn't share his grandfather's outlook on the situation. Mason looked worried.

Brayen couldn't blame him. Hell, he was worried himself.

"*You look like you're on the verge of claiming her where you stand.*" Mason's voice pushed into his mind, using the mental path they'd established long ago, when they were children.

*"I know."*

Mason shook his head. *"Bad idea, brother."*

They weren't related but often referred to themselves in such a manner.

*"I know."*

*"Yeah, if you fucking know so much then why are you still standing there with her?"* Mason questioned. *"You should be running in the other direction as far and as fast as you can."*

*"I know."*

And he did know, but he didn't care.

Mason made a move to come towards them and Brayen's cat nearly took control of him. His teeth lengthened, changing shape, morphing more towards a cougar than a human. He flashed them at Mason and knew that if it came down to it, he would kill his best friend, a man he considered a brother, for Lily. To protect her. To keep other unmated male shifters from her.

*"Mine,"* he pushed down the mental path at Mason.

Running Elk grabbed Mason's arm, halting him.

Mason's eyes widened.

*"Fuck, Cougs."*

The reality of it all hit him hard and he had to fight to regain control of himself. It took a moment for his mouth to ease and return to normal. His eyes went to blue once again. His control hinged on a thread and he wasn't safe to be around. Lily was human. She'd never understand or accept what he was. To humans shifters were the stuff of legends and myths. In addition, her humanity presented another problem aside from rejection. Fragility. Mortality.

If he lost total control around her and took her with the beast riding his actions, the likelihood he'd kill her during intercourse was great. Fear of harming her did what nothing else had—it forced him to separate from her.

He stepped back fast, startling Lily. She glanced up at him with hypnotic eyes, looking as if she'd been lost in thought against him.

*"Bray?"* she asked. *"Are you ready now?"*

He knew she was asking if he was ready to go back to her room and fuck her. Yes. He was more than ready but she wasn't and he wouldn't risk hurting her. Already he could barely control his shifter side. The last thing he wanted was for the animal side of him to be what ripped Lily out of his life.

He struggled for words that didn't seem to want to come. *"I've changed my mind."*

She paused, her gaze narrowing. *"Changed your mind?"*

He nodded.

*"You don't want to spend the night with me?"* she asked, her voice small.

Fuck. He hated himself for what had to be said. Pushing her away and assuring she didn't look back was the only thing that was going to save her from him.

"No, baby," he said, knowing the look he was giving her was one of a jackass. "My dick just isn't as into it as it had been. The longer I spend with you, the more I realize you're not really my type after all."

She flinched and he'd never hated himself more. He expected her to verbally lash back at him. Lily had a temper. He'd learned that the minute she'd entered his office.

Lowering her head, she remained in place a second before looking up at him, moisture coating her dark lashes. Something inside him broke at the sight of her unshed tears. He wanted to reach out to her, to tell her the truth, that she was all he'd ever wanted in a woman. That she turned him on in a way no one ever had or ever would again.

He held back, digging his fingernails into the palms of his hands. "I'll walk you back to your cabin."

She licked her lower lip and shook her head. "No."

This time he did reach for her but she jerked back, a lone tear escaping down her cheek. "Lily."

"Hey, Cougs," Mason said, suddenly next to them. "If you're done here, how about we grab some beer and maybe play some pool?"

He knew his friend was only trying to help. That Mason was aiding in giving him an out. His gaze locked on Lily's. Again, he reached for her. Again, she backed away from his touch. "Lily, please. I freaked. I got nervous about the way I—"

Mason grunted and gave him a hard shove.

Brayen ignored him.

Lily took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "It's fine. No. It's better than fine actually. I promised myself no commitments. No feelings. No strings. Thank you for assuring I hold to that. Goodnight, Brayen. It was a pleasure meeting you and thank you for dinner."

He'd done it. He'd successfully managed to get her to shut down on him. It's what he'd wanted. It's what was best for her. Why did it hurt so bad?

Mason moved in then, pushing on Brayen, forcing him back from Lily. "Lillian," Mason said. "You need to go now."

She nodded in understanding and looked up at Brayen one last time. She appeared to be on the verge of tears again. With a speed that surprised him, Lily pivoted and rushed out of the bar, her scent trailing behind her.

Brayen lost control then, his eyes shifting as claws emerged from his fingertips. He snarled, trying to go after her. Mason and several other men were suddenly on him, knocking him to the ground, pinning him in place. They were only trying to help. To keep him from stalking after Lily and possibly harming her. The beast didn't care or understand. It wanted Lily. So did he.

Running Elk's face appeared above him. The shaman whispered a chant and Brayen felt his beast caging so fast that it stunned him. He blinked, his mind in a slight haze. He stared around at people he considered family. "Lily?"

"She's gone, brother," Mason said softly. "I think you know it's for the best. You damn near did a full shift in the middle of the bar. She only just walked out of here when you did. If she'd have seen you, I don't even want to think on it."

Running Elk nodded. "Guardian, return to your home."

The old man liked to call Brayen by his shifter job description rather than his name or breed as Mason did. He exhaled slowly, knowing they were all right. He nodded.

Mason lifted his brows. "You'll go straight to your place? You won't try to make a pit stop at one hot little vixen's cabin?"

The breath went out of him as he realized how utterly helpless he was to Lily's pull. He met his friend's gaze. "Might be best if you make sure I don't."

"Yeah, I was already planning on as much," Mason returned, helping Brayen to stand.

Running Elk crossed his arms over his chest. "You will know when it's time."

"Time to what?" Brayen asked.

The old man wandered off, his words a riddle hanging in the air between them. Mason chuckled. "Ignore him. I'm pretty sure he doesn't even know what day it is. Just yesterday he told me he'd spent the night chatting it up with Sitting Bull and I think we all know Sitting Bull hasn't been around for a *while* now."

## Chapter Three

Lily sat on the porch of her tiny cabin, her knees tucked up and under her chin as she sniffled more. She'd spent so long struggling with the idea of Brayen being the man to possibly give her what she craved more than anything in the world—for him to be the one who eased the ache of her empty arms—that having him be the one to reject her, to force her away, seemed fitting. It's what she deserved.

Regardless of how long she'd spent planning the weekend away and coming to terms with what she had to do, she couldn't stay another minute. The idea of seeking out another man—a total stranger—to spend the night with her was laughable. The man she wanted didn't want her and it was for the best. It was wrong. So very wrong.

*You have Jack, she reminded herself. You love Jack. He loves you. You'll work things out. You'll be happy again.*

The cold bite of the night air left her shivering. She wasn't sure how long she'd been sitting there crying, but she knew it was a couple of hours at least. She'd run from Brayen and straight to the cabin, changing from the ridiculous get up she'd been in. She now wore a pair of silk pajama bottoms, a matching cami top and a thin robe. Her emotions had been high and she'd found herself out and on the porch, the night sky filled with moonlight.

With a deep breath, Lily stood, knowing she had to repack her suitcase and leave. She took a step towards the cabin door and froze at the sound of something low growling to her right. Woods lined the edges of the cabin on the right side and the back. They weren't as close on the front, set back so that a drive and grassy area were there, giving access to the cabins.

The growl intensified and she tensed. Fear knotted her stomach. Whatever it was, it was big and it was close enough to attack her. From the sounds of it, she was about to be its next meal.

Lily tried to calm herself. Tried to think clearly. She was well aware of the bear population in the area as well as wolves. Neither of which she wanted to have a face to face meeting with in the wild.

Additional growls joined the other and it was then she realized whatever it was, it wasn't alone.

Brayen sat in his office, finishing up the end of month books. He hated the work, but it needed to be done. He ran a legitimate business, even if it did cater to the supernatural. No one had investigated how the seemingly abandoned old hotel turned such a profit yet and Brayen guessed they never would.

His thoughts drifted back to Lily. He'd spent the last couple of hours thinking about her. It had taken everything in him not to take her, fuck her and claim her as his mate. She tested his control in a way no one else ever had. The very thought of her tear-filled green eyes twisted at his gut. He wanted to kiss away her doubt—tell her that he felt things for her that he shouldn't.

Damn her for showing up and ruining his perfectly uncluttered life. Damn her for being so fucking beautiful. Damn her for making him want her. Damn her for daring to be his life mate.

Brayen put his head in his hands and exhaled. He dragged his hands down his face, shaking his head. If he was right, and she was his life mate, he'd pushed her away. Hell, he'd chased her away.

*It's for the best.*

He snorted. "Keep telling yourself that, asshole."

Brayen logged his last entry and stopped when he heard the cry of a wolf. He knew that sound. It was one used before the wolf attacked its prey. He'd been charged with keeping the shifters in the area in line. He was their guardian, for lack of a better term, and he wasn't about to let a rogue werewolf spoil it for the bunch. If the damn thing did manage to kill anything the police would be crawling all over the area looking for clues and Brayen couldn't risk one of them being gifted enough to sense the shifter compound.

He stripped off his shirt and shoes as he ran outside. If it came down to a fight, he didn't want to ruin any more clothes than he had to. The cougar within him caught scent of the wolf and he ran in its direction. It was closer to the cabins than he would have liked to see. Normally, even the craziest of shifters would stay back from the cabin grounds. This one was bold or incredibly stupid. He couldn't figure out which.

Mason ran out of his cabin and looked at Brayen. "It's not one of mine."

"Rogue?" Brayen didn't want to hear the answer to his own question. If the wolf wasn't part of Mason's pack then they had trouble on their hands.

"That's my guess," Mason supplied.

"Shit!"

"Yeah," Mason said, stripping his shirt off as well. "Shit about covers it."

They ran towards the scent. Brayen stopped in mid-stride and Mason came close to knocking him over. "Hey, what the hell are we stopping for?"

Brayen put his hand up and motioned towards Lily. She stood near the edge of the porch to her cabin staring at a pack of wolves.

Mason sucked in a big breath.

Brayen could feel her fear as if it were his own. "Don't move, baby. Don't move," he said softly. She started to turn her head in their direction, but stopped. "That a girl. Don't move. We're coming up behind you. Once we're there, run."

A large black wolf, no doubt the alpha, growled at Brayen and Mason. Brayen's body burned for the change. He wanted to shift into a cougar and have at the wolves. He knew he was stronger than they were.



It had always been so. Mason's great-grandfather, the local shaman, had told him that he was born to be the guardian and that in the gift came great strength. He told him stories of his mother, Rose, showing up pregnant and alone. The people at the reservation had seen to her needs and when she'd died, they'd cared for him as if he were one of their own. And in a way, he was one of them. Different as his cougar DNA was, he still was a shifter all the same. Mason was like his brother and Mason was head wolf around these parts. They were both powerful and could take on any other shifter. He hadn't met an opponent who could hold a candle to him—at least not yet.

A white wolf snapped at Lily and she screamed. The wolves took her fear and ran with it. They lunged forward, leaving Mason and Brayen no choice but to shift to defend her.

Brayen's body transformed in mid-air as he leapt over Lily. He landed on all fours at her feet and slashed out at the alpha wolf, catching its snout and ripping it wide open with his paw and claws. Mason, in wolf form, appeared next to Brayen. He looked over at his friend, all black and lethal, before setting his attentions back on the rogues.

Lily stood frozen as she watched the events unfold before her. Her mind tried to make sense of the scene, but failed. A large tan cat, possibly a cougar, turned its amber eyes to her and snarled. She fought to get her feet to move.

"Brayen?"

She looked around but couldn't find him anywhere. There was no doubt in her mind that he'd spoken to her right before the white wolf leapt at her but she couldn't find him.

"Brayen!" She yelled, frantic now that he may have been attacked as well.

*"Go into the bar, now!"*

Lily turned, still searching for Brayen. He sounded so close.

*"Go, Lily!"*

The command startled her and brought her back into the moment. Standing in the dark with a huge group of wild animals was insane. Brayen wasn't out there. She must have hallucinated him. She ran towards the bar, her bare feet striking the unforgiving ground. She drew to a fast stop when another wolf appeared before her. It bared its teeth at her as it lunged off the ground. Lily screamed and attempted to jump out of its path. It dove past her and slid in the dirt.

Lily's scream caught Brayen's attention and cost him dearly when the alpha rogue sunk its teeth into his neck. He slashed out at it and caught it across the face. It released him quickly and ran off in the other direction. Mason glanced over at him and Brayen knew he would go after the wolf so Brayen could go to Lily.

*"Thank you, brother,"* Brayen pushed out with his mind.

*“Go see to your woman,”* Mason said, running after the alpha. *“If she has been bitten and exchanged blood then she will turn.”*

The thought of Lily turning into a shifter scared the hell out of him. Few survived the change and she was already so small, so delicate.

Lily screamed again and Brayen shifted back into human form before jumping between the wolf and her. He caught it in midair and twisted its snout hard. He felt its jaws breaking under the weight of his grasp and he had to fight back a smile.

“Get off my property! I will kill you if you set foot on it again,” he said, throwing the whimpering lycan across the yard. He whirled around to check on Lily. Her eyes were wide as she crab crawled away from him, shaking her head. He’d taken every precaution to prevent her from seeing him shape-shift so he didn’t understand what the problem was.

He made another move towards her and she fell onto her backside. “You’re bleeding and you’re...naked.”

*Shit, forgot about that.*

Brayen glanced down at himself and back at Lily. “I don’t suppose you could overlook the fact I’m walking around in the buff and trust me to get you to your cabin safely?”

She blinked twice before settling her gaze on his groin. The minute her green gaze locked on him, his cock acted of its own accord and hardened instantly. Painfully. The need to bury it in her was too great. He’d already denied himself too long. It was foolish and pointless. She was his woman. The gods had their reasoning for crossing their paths and he’d be damned if he forced her away from him again.

He stalked over to her and didn’t ask if it was all right to pick her up. He just did. Her desire for him filled his nose. She wanted him damn near as much as he wanted her and that did little in the way of helping his throbbing problem.

“Put me down,” she whispered. “You’re bleeding all over the place.”

“I’ll buy you new clothes.”

She balked. “I don’t care about my clothes. I’m worried about you hurting yourself more by carrying me. In case you haven’t noticed, you’re huge and if you should happen to pass out I’ll never be able to get you to safety if the wolves come back.”

“They won’t come back.” Brayen slowed his pace and stared down into her sweet face. No one had ever worried about him before. He was the guardian, the keeper of the lycans. He made sure they were safe. No one looked out for him in such a manner. Need pulsed throughout his veins.

“Lily, if I carry you into your cabin I’m staying the night with you. Tell me now if you don’t want me because once my foot crosses that threshold there will be no turning back. And I think we both know what will take place if I stay with you.”

“Carry me in.”

His heart stopped. “Are you sure?”

“I think you’ve lost too much blood and it’s affected your hearing. Carry me in already, would you?” She pursed her lips. “Unless the longer you hold me, the less you want me and the more you realize I’m not your type.”

Her sass appealed to him even more than if she’d been submissive. “Woman, I think we’re both well aware that I was lyin’ through my damn teeth—trying to keep from fucking you where we stood.”

The look in her eyes said she wasn’t so sure he’d been lying.

He stilled, staring down at her. “Lily, you’re everything I want in a woman. Everything.”

“Brayen.”

“Shh, beautiful,” he said. The need to claim her drove him onward even though his neck was raw and she’d been right. He had lost too much blood. The werecougar in him made him able to stand more pain and to sustain injuries that would kill a human. It also made his lifespan close to ten times longer than a human’s. He didn’t want to think about outliving Lily.

He couldn’t.

He opened the door to her cabin slowly, watching the expression on her face as he went. There was no way he’d take her without her consent. It didn’t matter that he’d die from need. He’d see to his mate’s happiness first.

He set Lily down on the bed and backed away from her slowly, letting his eyelids flutter shut for a moment. The cougar in him was trying to surface and he wouldn’t let it out. He wouldn’t let it claim her without restrictions—without assurance she’d be safe.

“Brayen?”

“I need to clean up. I’ll be right back.”

“You need a doctor.” The worry on her face made him want her even more.

He reached out and caressed her cheek gently. “I’ll be fine. I promise. I just want to wash the blood off me. You deserve better than this.”

Lily averted her gaze and he watched closely as her expression changed. “Please don’t put me on a pedestal. I don’t deserve that.”

Something in her tone told him this was bigger than she was letting on. “Lily? Do you want to talk about it?”

Her gaze came back to him. “No, I don’t want to talk. I just want to be with you.”

Need rippled through him as he looked down at her. “I’ll be right back.”

## Chapter Four

“Hey, can I help?” Lily’s asked, her voice sugary sweet.

Brayen stiffened as Lily opened the shower door. His hungry eyes skimmed over her naked body, soaking up its glory. His cock responded instantly. The need to pull her into the shower with him was great and he gave in to it.

“Oh,” she gasped as he lifted her quickly.

“Oh,” he echoed with a small grin.

With her in his arms, she was finally high enough to kiss comfortably so he took full advantage of the fact. Pressing her tiny body against the cool tile, he found her mouth and forced his tongue into it. She met him with a fury, her arms going around his neck and her breasts pressing against his chest. The feel of her hard nipples against his skin made his cock throb.

“Wrap your legs around me.”

Lily obeyed and as she wrapped them around him, he felt her hot core near the tip of his cock. “You’re wet.”

She let out a sultry laugh and kissed his jaw line. “Because we’re in the shower, silly.”

Brayen worked his hand down her side, running his fingers over her breast on the way down to her core. “That’s not what I meant,” he said, shoving his finger into her, finding her even wetter than he’d first thought. He licked her lip and bit at her tongue gently as it came out to greet his. “So tight.”

They moaned together. She tipped her head back, pushing her breasts up into his face. He was left with no choice. He had to enter her or burst. He positioned the head of his cock and thrust in hard and fast. Lily cried out and clutched onto him. He stopped in mid motion.

“Did I hurt you?”

Her gaze found his as she dove at his mouth, tugging his bottom lip with her teeth. “More.”

He obliged. Pumping the length of shaft into her repeatedly, savoring every second of having her tight pussy encompassing him. “Do you feel that? You were made for me.”

She answered him by planting tiny kisses on his throat. She pulled back quickly and caught his face in her hands, forcing his eyes to hers. “You’re healed.”

He tensed, his cock still deep in her.

She narrowed her gaze. “*What* are you?”

The thought of lying to her never entered his mind and that should have scared him. The existence of his people depended on humans not knowing about them. Brayen did use his gifts to coat his voice with a bit of reassurance. It was easy to do, yet he found he rarely used that talent. "I'd never hurt you, Lily. I'm a shape-shifter. Like the legends of old. My animal is the cougar." He eased his cock deeper and then held steady, unsure if she'd still accept him.

Her eyes widened and he waited for her to scream. She didn't. "You were the tan cat that saved me from the wolves." She glanced away a moment. "Those weren't ordinary wolves, were they?"

"No," he answered honestly.

"They would have killed me?"

"Among other things."

Lily ran her hands through his hair and traced her way over his shoulders, down the length of his arms. He began to move within her, slowly, unsure how to take her calmness. He expected hysterics.

"Is your condition genetic?" she asked between pants.

Her question caught him off guard. He'd set himself up for her to scream bloody murder and demand he exit her body immediately. "Umm, I guess, but I don't know. I can't have children until I find my life mate."

She looked saddened by his news. "How many life mates do you get?"

He pumped himself into her slowly, filling her, feeling her body tighten around him, trying his best to stay focused on their conversation. It was hard to do when her breasts seemed to swell beneath his touch. "I only get one. Do you want me to stop? Are you afraid of me?"

"I'm not afraid of you for the reason you'd think. I'm afraid I won't be able to walk away from you."

"You don't have to walk away, Lily," he said. "You could stay with me."

"Shh," she said, pulling his mouth to hers. He quickened his strokes and let out a muffled moan as she bit gently on his tongue.

He reached down and rubbed his fingers over her swollen clit. She jerked and bit down harder on his tongue, drawing blood and pulling the beast within him to the surface. A growl emanated from him as his body shook. Lily's tight pussy milked him and brought his own release on suddenly. Brayen almost lost his footing as the water beat down on his back and his seed spurted into her womb. His incisors lengthened and he bent his head, sinking them into her soft skin.

Lily cried out and grabbed hold of his hair as her blood flowed into his mouth. Her channel constricted again as the pleasure of his bite brought another orgasm. Before he knew it, he was coming again as well, spilling his seed into her once more, filling her womb with his power.

He pulled back from her slowly, running his rough tongue over the bite mark. The realization of what he'd just done sunk in. He'd marked her while having sex. He'd mated with her. Brayen pulled back from her quickly and let her legs slide down him.

She stood before him and ran her hands over his stomach before wrapping her arms around him. Her embrace felt so right, so perfect. She was his other half. The one he'd searched for all his life, yet she was human. He couldn't explain it to himself, let alone to her.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get you cleaned up before the shock of what I am sinks in."

Lily tightened her hold on him. "I'm not shocked at all. My grandmother told me about you. She said men like you existed and that I was born to walk among them. Of course, I took everything she said with a grain of salt. That will teach me," she said, with a laugh. "I mean who believes they were destined to meet people who can turn into animals?"

Brayen paused, wondering if her grandmother was a supernatural. It would make sense. Lily was something slightly more than just human. He just wasn't sure what. "Did she also tell you that you'd end up mated to one the rest of your life?"

Lily's arms dropped away from him. Sorrow filled her voice as she spoke. "We have the weekend, Brayen. That's all we'll ever have."

*Like hell.*

"No, we can have eternity. All you have to do is say the word."

She put her hand on his chest, her palm scorching his skin as she shook her head. "I can't give you any more than the weekend."

If she thought for one minute he'd let her walk out of his life she was not only wrong, but crazy as well. They were married in the eyes of the shifter community and that was not something to be taken lightly. She was now the guardian's wife—his mate, and hopefully, if they should happen to be blessed enough, the mother of his children.

He turned off the water and lifted her from the shower. The sweet smell of her sex permeated upwards and he found himself instantly aroused. Her tiny fingers wrapped partway around his shaft, causing him to moan.

"You are insatiable," she whispered.

"When I find something that makes me happy I tend to run with it."

"I see that."

"Say you'll stay longer than the weekend," Brayen pleaded, needing to hear she'd consider it. Though he was sure she had no idea just what she was to him now. In her eyes, he was a one-night stand. In his world, she was his wife.

He led her into the bedroom area and to the bed. He laid her damp body out on the bed and pushed her legs apart with his knee. He edged the head of his cock near her still-soaked pussy and leered down at her.

She bucked beneath him, trying to get him to enter her. "Please."

He refused to give her what she wanted. "Promise me more than the weekend, Lily."

"I can't."

He let the tip of his dick slip into her. Still tight, her cunt seemed to seize hold of him. It took everything in him not to slam himself down to the hilt. He needed to hear her promise to stay. He wasn't sure why it was so important to him, but it was. "Lily, let me love you more than a few days."

*Let me love you forever.*

"Brayen," she sighed out his name.

Seeing that he had lost this one battle, but refusing to lose the war, he plunged into her, determined to lay claim to her in as many ways as he could. A scream tore from her as he sank his teeth into her breast, riding her body the entire time. Each thrust, each draw of her blood, put him closer to the edge of sanity.

Lily raked at his back. He felt the blood running down him as the fiery hot feel of her sharp nails continued to dig into him. She came with a start. "Brayen, oh yes, Brayen, yes... Fill me, give it to me."

How could he resist such a simple request? He thrust into her again, this time holding himself in her as his cock pumped, shooting forth his come.

## Chapter Five

Brayen took a deep breath in, holding Lily's sweet scent in him. His insides churned. He'd never experienced anything like this before. Waking up with her tiny body wrapped around him after a night of unbelievable lovemaking was almost too much.

For a tiny thing, Lily was insatiable. They'd had sex nearly every way possible in the tiny cabin. So many times, in fact, he'd thought for sure they'd both be unable to move for days.

He reached down and ran his hand over her lower abdomen. Afraid to say it aloud, he just let his hand rest there, hoping the gods would see fit to give them a family someday. After the passion they'd shared, Lily couldn't just walk out. She could say they had only the weekend until she was blue in the face, but leaving him would hurt her as much as it would hurt him. They were connected now—mated.

*"Cougar,"* Mason's voice pushed into his mind.

He stirred slightly, careful not to wake Lily. *"What is it?"*

*"The rogue wolves were spotted in the area again. I'm going to take a group out to hunt them at dusk. I thought you might want to come too."*

Brayen looked down at Lily and exhaled slowly. *"I can't."*

*"I understand. Stay with her and I'll do my best to ensure she doesn't see any of us shift."*

*"She knows what we are."*

Dead silence greeted him. He knew Mason was attempting to understand why Brayen had told an outsider about them. The laws of their kind were clear. No outsider was to know of them and live. Lily wasn't an outsider anymore. She was his mate.

*"Cougar..."*

*"I took her as my mate,"* Brayen said quickly, not wanting Mason's wheels to spin.

*"She's not one of us."*

*"I know, but that doesn't change the fact she's my mate. Look at us. You consider me your brother, yet my mother came here, pregnant and alone, without an ounce of Lakota blood in her. Running Elk took me in. I'm as different as she is, yet I'm your family."*

He felt the weight of Mason's thoughts. *"That's different, Brayen. Grandfather knew instantly you carried the traits of a cougar in you. The human doesn't carry a were gene... Not unless you infect her with it. That could be the answer to all our problems."*

*"No!"*



“Brayen?”

He cut communication with Mason instantly. He wouldn't entertain bringing Lily over. The change could kill her.

Brayen gathered Lily in his arms and pressed his lips to her forehead. She was his now and he'd never give her up or let harm come to her. If his people weren't willing to accept her as she was then he'd leave. It was that simple. His wife came before all else.

Lily woke slowly, still sore from the incredible night of lovemaking she'd shared with Brayen. How a man could go that many times in one night was beyond her. They'd done so many things, things she'd never dreamt of doing, that she blushed again thinking about them.

She smiled sheepishly as she thought about Brayen holding her hair as he commanded her to “suck him off”, and oh, how she had. She had taken every last inch of his abnormally large cock into her mouth until it had hit the back of her throat. She could still hear his soft moans of pleasure and feel his abs tighten under the weight of her fingertips as he spit seed down her throat. It was one of the most erotic experiences she'd ever had with a man, and it hardened her heart to think about it.

*I have to walk away. I have to go home. I have a life there, waiting for me to put it back together again. She tensed. I can't leave Brayen. I've fallen in love with him.*

Love? Where the hell had that come from? What had provoked her decision to stay? She hardly knew the man and the little she did know would have scared anyone else to death.

Lily shook the thoughts from her head and looked around the cabin for Brayen. He was nowhere to be found. She sat up slowly. The discomfort from being ridden hard by Brayen left her a bit worse for the wear.

She crept over to the cabin door, tucking the sheet from the bed around her more. She opened the door slowly. Shocked at first by the fact it was dark out again, she inched her way out of the cabin. She would have turned around and waited in the cabin for him, but the sound of his voice, raised in anger, grabbed her.

“I will not turn her!” Brayen shouted.

“You'll turn her or we'll have no choice but to deal with her,” Mason's voice followed close behind his.

Brayen snarled. “Don't even fucking think about laying a hand on her or I will forget I call you brother.”

“Come on, Cougar. Be realistic. Turn her or kill her. If you don't, one of the others here will. Do you want them sticking their dicks in your woman for the rest of your life? Claim her fully or they will—if you're lucky. They could always just kill her. Would you rather that happen? Let us pray it's a swift death because you know how some of them like to play with their food.”

“God dammit, Mason! Why does it have to be this way? Why can’t I just love her as she is?” Brayen asked. He sounded like he might be crying. “She’s still refusing to stay with me. She says we only have the weekend and that she’ll go then.”

“Did you tell her she couldn’t?”

“I asked her not to.”

Mason made an odd sound. “Tell you what, brother. I’ll hold the rest of the pack back until tomorrow night. If you haven’t turned her by then, then we’ll be left no choice but to protect our secret...whatever the cost.”

“No,” Brayen said quickly. “If it comes down to it, I’ll deal with her. No one else is to touch her. Am I clear?”

He’d deal with her?

What did that even mean?

He’d try to turn her into one of them or he’d be the one who granted her a merciful quick death?

Lily choked back a sob as she hurried back into their cabin, leaving them to finish their conversation. Her heart sped and she had to fight to keep from screaming.

Something sharp pinched in her lower abdomen and her eyes widened in horror. “No, I can’t be.” Instinctively, she knew that it was true.

The door to the cabin opened and Lily had no more time to think about what she’d just learned. Brayen stood there smiling at her as if he had no cares in the world. “How do you feel? Not too sore, I hope.”

“Fine,” she said sternly.

“Everything okay?”

She couldn’t tip him off that she knew what he had to do. She forced a smile onto her face and let the sheet fall away from her body. There was no way she’d stay through tomorrow and put him in the position of having to decide how to best handle her but there was also no way she could leave without feeling his body in hers one more time. Like it or not, she was addicted to him. In love with him and deathly afraid of him.

Lily put her hand out, summoning him to her. His golden hair caught pieces of the moonlight streaming in from the window. He looked like a god standing there and she knew he held the power of life and death in his hands.

He let a wicked grin spill over his face. “Mmmm, I believe your sex drive may rival my own.” He covered the distance between them and pulled her into his arms. “I love my smell all over you. Don’t get me wrong, I love the way you smell, but—” he drew in a deep breath, “—I like knowing you’re mine. Always and forever.”

She choked back the tears that threatened to fall. Oh, how she wished what he said were true. Somewhere along the line, she'd lost the will to return to the life she once knew and wanted only to be loved by him for the rest of her days, but if the rest of his people had anything to do with it, tomorrow would be her last day. Panic welled inside her and she clutched onto Brayen's strong arms to stay grounded.

"Lily? What's wrong?"

She fought to regain her composure and leaned up to meet his lips. "Fuck me."

Brayen stiffened at her words. His nostrils flared slightly and she almost screamed when his eyes flickered from blue to amber. When he spoke, his voice sounded labored and deeper than normal. "Woman, you shouldn't talk to me like that. The beast is hard enough to control around you."

He turned her around quickly and she yelped. Material ripped behind her and it only took a moment to figure out what it was: Brayen's clothing. He forced her to her hands and knees. His fingers seemed to caress her entire body. Heat built inside her and she whimpered as he tweaked her nipples.

"Such ripe berries. They taste as sweet, you know."

Lily only moaned in response to him as Brayen slid his hands down her body and found her swollen clit, plucking it, sending white-hot stabs of pleasure through her lower regions. Gasping for breath, she clawed at the floor, trying desperately to find her center. She failed. An orgasm ripped through her, leaving her out of breath and falling forward.

Wrapping his arms around her waist, Brayen leaned in to her, his rigid cock pressed against her soaked entrance. "I'm not done with you, my love."

*Love?*

"I can't take...any more," she panted.

He growled near her ear and rubbed the head of his cock in and out of her pussy. "That's it, beautiful." He slid the length of himself into her quickly. Unable to hold her exhausted body up, she fell onto her elbows. Brayen stroked her back tenderly. "I'll do the work. Just stay there and enjoy it. You do like it?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I love it. I love you."

Her confession came just as Brayen slid a finger into her anus. She cried out and tried to crawl away from him. His other arm encircled her, pulling her back to him, forcing his cock deeper into her womb and his finger farther into her anus. She was so full. Too full.

"Brayen."

Angling her hips upward, Brayen pumped harder into her, hitting her G-spot. The orgasm blindsided her, leaving her contracting on both his cock and finger. "So fucking tight, Lily... So fucking perfect."

He slammed his body down hard into hers, jerking as he came deep within her. "I love you too, Lily, with all my heart."

She froze. He'd heard her confession? She'd assumed he hadn't, but now as he held her to his body, still spilling semen into her, she knew he too shared her feelings.

The tears she'd tried so desperately to hold back flowed freely. She did her best to steel herself to the reality of what she was about to do. She would wait until he fell asleep and then she'd leave without so much as a goodbye. There was little choice for her. There was more than just her own safety to think about now.

She tensed, her gaze drifting down the length of her body. Without a doubt, she knew she now carried his child within her and there was no way in hell she'd risk it—or put Brayen through having to decide how to best handle her in order to protect his people.

She and the baby would go far away. They'd return to the life she'd had and she would never look back. It was as it had to be.

## Chapter Six

*Six Years Later*

Brayen touched Renee's shoulder and gave her a halfhearted smile. "Thanks for inviting me. This is nice."

"Whoof, nice he says." Renee jabbed him in the rib cage and narrowed her eyes. "Nice is you finally getting out and seeing people. You stay locked away with—"

Brayen's jaw tightened. "Say it. Animals."

Renee shook her head and glanced nervously at the kitchen door. "I'd never call you or others like you animals, and you know that. My father was one and I loved him. I grew up wishing I'd gotten the gene that causes it."

He froze as he heard Renee confess to wanting to be a shape-shifter. He wouldn't wish it upon anyone. Having normal friends was rare. Renee was one of the only humans he interacted with and that's only because he'd known her father. The only other human he'd ever gotten close to had walked in and out of his life in a matter of two days, but had left a gaping hole in his heart that would never heal.

"Brayen, you all right?" Renee asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

He nodded and grabbed the plate from her hands. "Here. I'll take that out to Will. Those burgers smell done enough as is. Any more and we'll be chewing on charcoal."

Renee laughed as he headed towards the back door. He opened the French door and stopped when he caught scent of *her*.

It couldn't be.

Nearly six years had passed since she'd come in and then vanished from his life.

He inhaled again. The scent was unmistakable.

*Lily.*

He looked around frantically and spotted her standing there. She was still as beautiful as the night she walked in needing a room for the weekend.

Lily was dressed in a pale yellow sundress that hung to her ankles. Her dark brown hair seemed a little longer than the last time he'd seen her, but other than that she hadn't changed in almost six years.

Something brushed past Brayen's hand and he drew in a sharp breath as a tiny shock passed through his skin. He glanced down to find a little girl standing next to him. She looked up at him and smiled wide.

A tiny dimple formed on the right side of her face and her blue gaze locked onto his. “She’s like an angel, isn’t she?” she asked softly.

“Who?”

The little girl pointed out towards Lily and reached up to take his hand. He stood still, reluctant to touch the tiny being next to him. She seemed so small he feared he’d crush her. She pressed her hand into his and looked at Lily. “I tell her she looks like an angel all the time, but she doesn’t believe me. I can tell you think she looks like one too.”

Brayen chuckled. “Oh, you can? You seem awfully young to know so much.”

She huffed. “I’m five and I’m very smart for my age.”

“Ah, I see,” Brayen said, stiffening as he saw a man approaching Lily. The man looked as though he’d fallen out of the pages of *GQ* or at the very least was a Kennedy. Brayen’s muscles flexed as the man’s hand ran up Lily’s back like it belonged there. She settled back into his arms and it was clear to see how very happy she was. The man wrapped his body around her and swayed back and forth with her.

Blinding rage overcame Brayen, and he clutched hold of the doorframe to keep from growling and drawing attention to himself. A tiny cry sounded next to him and he glanced down to see the brown-haired girl staring at him with wide eyes. He looked at his hand and realized he was still holding her small hand. With his shifter strength he could crush it without thought. Worry like he’d never known before came over him. Brayen dropped to his knees next to her and inspected her for injury.

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” he said. “Did I hurt you?”

Her lips puckered out. “Just a little. How did you do that?”

“Do what?”

She moved up closer to him. “How did you make the same noise that I make? The mean kitty sound?”

Brayen hadn’t realized he’d made any noise. He smiled at the little girl and touched her hand gently. How he hadn’t smashed all the bones in her hand was a mystery. “What’s your name?”

“Rebecca-Rose, but everyone calls me Becca-Rose. What’s yours?”

“Rose? That was my mother’s name. You must be a very special little girl to have a name like that,” Brayen said, giving her a wide smile.

Becca-Rose reached up and touched his cheek softly. Her tiny finger went to his dimple and her eyes widened. “You’ve got the same hole when you smile. My mommy says she can see all the way through my head when I smile big.”

Brayen let out a throaty laugh and patted her head gently. “I think your mommy sounds like she’s a good mommy.”

“Oh, no, she’s the bestest mommy ever!”

“Rebecca-Rose, what are you doing bothering this nice man?”

Brayen's nostrils flared as he glanced up to see the Kennedy standing over them. The man gave Becca-Rose a sideways glance and then started to laugh. "I leave you alone for five minutes and you're harassing Renee and Will's guests." He looked at Brayen and put his hand out. "Hi, I'm Jack Preston. I see you've already met my daughter, Becca."

Brayen stood slowly and took the man's hand in his. He could smell Lily on him. They'd been intimate recently and the thought sickened him. Becca-Rose touched his arm lightly, keeping him from shifting and ripping Jack Preston's head clean off.

Jack smiled down at his daughter and reached for her. She leapt into his arms but kept her eyes on Brayen. "Daddy, he can make the kitty noise like me."

Jack glanced nervously at Brayen but forced a smile to his lips. "Oh, he can, can he? Does he get into as much mischief as you too?"

Becca-Rose shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know, Daddy, maybe. He's strong, too."

"I'm sure he is, peanut," he said, setting her down gently. "Mommy's looking for you. She wants you to sit down and eat something. I told her not to bother, but you know your mom."

Becca-Rose nodded. "I told him Mommy looks like an angel. I think he believed me."

Brayen's gut clenched tight and he scanned the yard for signs of Lily. She was a mother now and a wife? That couldn't be. She was *his* wife and supposed to be the mother of *his* children someday. He watched as Becca-Rose skittered away, leaving him standing face to face with Jack.

"She's a cute kid. You and your wife must be very proud." Brayen almost choked on the words as he said them.

Jack nodded and walked over to the cooler. He grabbed a bottle of water. "You want a beer or anything?"

"No, I'm fine," Brayen said, watching him carefully. "Only water for you?"

"Yeah, I'm on call at the hospital. They've got someone in the ER now, but if things get backed up I'll need to head in."

Of course, Lily would be married to a doctor. A nasty thought popped into his head. "So, if you don't mind me asking, how long have you been married?"

Jack reached out and touched Brayen's shoulder. He wanted to bite the man but stood tall. "Lillian and I have been an item since high school. I loved her from the moment I laid eyes on her and we've never been apart. I married her right out of high school and made it work through college. It was rough, but we made it. My family didn't approve. They even managed to come between us for a while there, before Becca-Rose was born. I didn't think we'd make it for a while there. Divorce papers were already filed... Oh, look at me ramble on. That was more information than you wanted."

"You can say that again," an identical replica of Jack said as he approached.

Brayen looked at the twins and his nausea only intensified. Of course, they'd come in pairs.

Jack smiled at him. "Ah, this is my brother Lewis. Lewis this is...?"

"Jack! Your pager's going off!" Lily's voice floated over the crowd.

"Better run. Wouldn't want to keep her waiting," Lewis said sardonically.

It was clear to Brayen that Lewis didn't like Lily. He could smell his hate for her rolling off the man and he found himself wanting to snap both their necks. Jack looked at Brayen and ran his fingers through his short black hair. "Work needs me. Sorry I couldn't introduce you to Lily. She'd love to meet the man who charmed Becca." He smiled and turned to go. "See to it Lily and Becca-Rose get home safe if I'm not back," he said to Lewis.

"No problem, brother," Lewis muttered as he watched Jack run off. He made a gagging sound and glanced up at Brayen. "Does it sicken you too?"

Brayen jumped, a bit startled by the question. "Does what sicken me?"

"Seeing the two of them together."

"I take it you don't care much for your sister-in-law."

Lewis let out an icy laugh and looked Brayen dead in the eye. "He could have done so much better than a little squaw half-breed piece of trash. Hell, anything would have been better than that."

Brayen saw red but did his best to stay levelheaded. "From my understanding, Jack's wife is quite proud of her ancestry. I'd love to be a full-blooded Lakota"

"Lak... what?" Lewis waved his hand in the air. "Please, you don't have to pretend for my sake. Nobody wants the red man's blood in them, least of all me. It sickens me Jack tainted the Preston name with that stain. I told him to let the half breed suck his dick, spread her legs and that was it, not put a ring on her damn finger. Our mother never approved. Right up until she died she begged him to reconsider his choice in a wife."

Brayen resisted the urge to smash Lewis's head into the wall and watched as he walked away into the crowd of people. Renee walked up behind him and tapped his shoulder. "Planning on taking that plate out to Will or are you willing to eat your meat cooked for once?"

"Would you mind doing it? I've got, umm, I've got a bit of a problem with keeping my *problem* at bay." He hoped Renee would understand that if he took one step out the door after Lewis he would shift into the cougar and rip out the man's throat.

Renee took the plate from him and walked outside. "You are so going to have to fill me in on what's going on with you when I get back. Try not to eat any of my guests."

"Renee, have you seen Lily's keys? Someone's parked behind me and the hospital needs me," Jack said, appearing behind Brayen.

Renee glanced back and pointed towards the countertop. "She always tosses them in the basket with mine. I swear, the woman should have been my sister. She's here enough. I'll give her a ride home later. She can't drive your stick shift."



"Thanks, doll!" Jack said, snatching the keys up. "Watch her. She's a wild one."

"Daddy, Daddy," Becca-Rose cried, running past Brayen to Jack. "Don't go today, Daddy, please."

Jack's eyebrows came together. "Peanut, you've never asked me not to go in to work before. What's wrong? You know sick people need Daddy's help, right?"

Large tears welled in little Becca-Rose's eyes and Brayen felt his heart break with the fall of each one. "I know, Daddy, but don't go today, please. I have a bad feeling. The kind that pulls at my tummy and makes the kitty noise come again."

Jack kissed her forehead and wiped away her tears. "I'll be back soon and we can have a tea party. I'll even wear one of those silly hats, okay?" He set her down and looked up at Brayen. "Sorry to ask you to do this, but could you see to it she doesn't run out behind me? Lily will be in here in just a minute."

Brayen nodded and moved closer to Becca. He watched Jack run out the door and had to pick Becca-Rose up to keep her from following him.

"Put me down, put me down!"

"Your father asked me to keep you here until your mommy comes in." Brayen tried to sound gentle but he'd never been around small children and wasn't sure how to handle this type of situation.

Becca-Rose twisted in his arms and snarled at him. Brayen's heart leapt to his throat. He knew that sound. He'd made it enough himself. He took a deep breath in and held it. Becca-Rose's scent was familiar. She smelled of Lily and... He took another breath. He staggered backwards, but managed to hold her steady. Becca-Rose smelled of cougar, like him. She twisted in his arms and looked at him. Her blue eyes shifted to amber before she snarled again.

He let out a throaty growl as a warning to her not to try anything and she stopped moving in his arms. Her wide eyes fell on him and tears filled them. "He won't be back."

Brayen glanced towards the front of Renee's large home. "Sure he will, sweetie."

She shook her head. "No, Daddy won't ever be back and Mommy will cry. Lots. I'll cry too." She put her head on his shoulder and he smoothed her long hair down. "You'll help make it better, won't you? I know you will make it better."

Brayen wasn't sure what to say to her. He couldn't come out and tell her that he thought he was her father. No. Jack had filled those shoes all her life. It was clear she loved the man and he her, but Brayen had to know. He turned with her in his arms and found Lily standing behind him, her mouth open.

"Brayen," she said his name softly. She looked at Becca-Rose in his arms. Her face paled and she grabbed hold of the countertop to steady herself. That was all the confirmation he needed. She'd left him almost six years ago in the middle of the night, pregnant with his child, and never told him about her.

He hugged Becca-Rose to his chest and shook his head at Lily. "How could you not tell me?"

"Brayen," she said, moving closer to him and lowering her voice. "I was, *am*, a married woman. I, we... Jack and I couldn't have... I..."

The realization of what she was saying sunk in. He'd been nothing more than a sperm donor. She was his mate, his world, his wife. He'd thought that what they had was special. Now he knew it meant nothing to her. Brayen fought back the emotions trying to surface and did his best not to let Lily see the hurt in his eyes.

Someone pounded on the front door and it burst open. "Lillian! Lewis!"

Lewis burst through the back door and Lily followed close behind him as he ran to the front room. "Chief Sisel?"

A tall man stood there, covered in blood. His eyes were wild as he looked at Lily. "Lillian, there's been an accident, just down the bend, near the river. Jack's—" He dropped his head down.

"No!" Lewis shouted.

"What?" Lily whispered softly as she took a step back. "No, Adam. No, don't do this, don't... No, Jack's fine. He's at the hospital now. They needed his help... He's fine."

Chief Sisel made a move towards her and she darted away from him. "Lillian, Jack's gone. Beth and I were on our way up here for the picnic and I watched him lose control of your car and—I tried to save him—I radioed in for help and the squad was there in a matter of minutes. Lillian, they said it was instant. They said he didn't suffer."

Brayen turned with Becca-Rose in his arms and ran towards the backyard. She clung to him sobbing and mumbling about how she knew her daddy wasn't coming back. He spotted Renee and ran to her. "There's been an accident... Jack."

Renee reached for Becca-Rose but Becca-Rose held tight to his neck. "Sweetie, go to Renee. I need to check on Mommy." Renee gave him a puzzled look but didn't question him.

"I want to stay with you. You can't leave us now. He'll hurt mommy. He doesn't like her... Please," Becca-Rose said between sobs.

Brayen passed her to Renee and kissed her tiny cheek quickly. "I won't leave you, sweetie," he said softly, wondering who *he* was.

## Chapter Seven

Brayen ran to the front yard and found Chief Sisel holding Lily in his arms as she kicked and screamed at him to let her go to Jack. She lashed out again and caught the Chief's cheek. He loosened his grip enough for her to weasel out of his grasp.

"Lillian!" Chief Sisel called out after her.

"Let her go. Maybe we'll get lucky and the bitch will die too," Lewis whispered under his breath. The Chief missed the comment, but Brayen's ultra-sensitive hearing let him pick up on every bit of it. He shot Lewis a nasty look and raced down the drive after Lily. She'd covered quite a bit of ground in a short period of time and Brayen had to grab her around the waist to get her to stop.

She pounded on his chest as he spun her around. "Let go of me!"

"Lily, please stop. Let's go back up to Renee's and—"

"And what?" she demanded. "He's gone, Brayen. Jack is gone. He can't be dead. I didn't mean for it to happen. He should have punished me, not Jack."

Brayen held her to him and shook his head. "Who should punish you and what the hell are you talking about?"

"God," she replied. "He should have punished me, not Jack. I'm the one who lied. Not Jack."

"Baby, please, I don't understand. I want to help you, but you need to get a hold of yourself. What did you lie about?"

She cried and slapped him hard across the face. He didn't flinch. He just let her hit him repeatedly. "I lied to Jack when he found out Becca-Rose wasn't his. He asked if I loved her father." She took a deep breath in. "I said no. I looked him in the eyes and I told him I never loved you, that I only used you. I lied to him. Oh God, I lied to him."

Brayen set her down and grabbed her wrists. He pulled her body to his and let her cry as he held her. "It's okay, baby. It's okay. You weren't being punished. It's okay."

"It's not okay! I lied to him. It was bad enough he found out she wasn't his. I couldn't bring myself to hurt him more. I love him, Brayen, I do...did...but not as much as I love you, and now he's dead because of me. I need to go to him, right now. I need to see him." She clutched onto his shirt and clawed at his chest. "I thought we were going to make it. Jack said he understood, but now he's gone. He can't be gone. They're wrong. He's fine. I'm sure he's fine. Right?"

Brayen did his best to hold his emotions in check. On one hand, he had his mate confessing to loving him more than her husband, yet on the other hand, he felt her pain and sorrow. “Come on, baby, let’s get you back to the house. Becca-Rose needs you to be strong now.”

## Chapter Eight

Lily looked out at the For Sale sign and pressed her forehead to the window. Renee had told her to keep the house. That it was what Jack would have wanted, but she couldn't bear to live with the memory of him all around her. Every room reminded her of him, and she couldn't do it anymore. He'd been gone for six months now and she still couldn't go to his gravesite. Her shame over their last few weeks together was too great.

Becca-Rose's eyes had shifted. That was the first sign something was different with her. Lily had tried to make excuses for it, but she knew why. She knew Brayen's dark gift had been passed to her daughter and that one day Becca-Rose might very well be able to change into a cougar at will. Jack had finally cornered her with blood tests his brother Lewis had run on Becca-Rose the last time she was in for a check-up. Being married to a twin whose other half was also a doctor had never been easy, but Lewis's deception had almost cost Lily her marriage.

The hurt in Jack's eyes was so great when she walked in and found him holding the paternity papers that she knew instantly what had happened. She just didn't know why Lewis had done it. Sure, he disliked her—he always had—but to come in five years after the fact?

They'd been happy. She'd done what she had to do to have a baby and Jack had understood. He'd forbidden her to seek medical attention because he didn't want his colleagues knowing they were having trouble conceiving a child. She'd honored that wish and when he'd left for the conference in Chicago for the weekend, during their legal separation, she'd seized the moment and gone to the bar she'd heard Renee mention once. Her intent had been to get pregnant, not to fall in love. She'd succeeded in one, but failed miserably in the other.

Her cell phone rang. She looked at the display screen and rolled her eyes when she saw Lewis's name. "Hello?"

"Lily, I need for you to sign a few papers for me. It has to do with Jack's share of the family practice. You'll maintain control of it, of course, but I just need to get the okay for a few things."

The last thing she wanted to deal with right now was more paperwork. "Whatever, Lewis. Becca-Rose and I will stop by before we leave town. Are you at the office or home?"

"I've got to make a quick stop tonight, Lily. Why don't you meet me—" The phone lost its reception. Normally she would have been ticked that her phone had once again dropped out on her, but the fact it cut Lewis off was a blessing, so she went with it.

Lily listened close and heard Becca-Rose's voice coming from Jack's old office. Lily hadn't been able to set foot in there yet. Lewis had handled packing up all of Jack's belongings for her. She'd had to leave the house when he did. Seeing the exact replica of Jack wandering around the house had been too much for her.

She stopped just outside the office door and listened to Becca-Rose talking softly. "Yes, Mommy is still sad. I tried to get her to smile today, but she doesn't ever smile anymore. No, I want her to leave. He's bad and he'll hurt her. You know he will."

Lily cracked the door open and found Becca-Rose sitting in the center of the empty room. "I know that you love me, Daddy, but I can't get Mommy to stop missing you," Becca-Rose said to the empty room. Lily's stomach tightened. Now wasn't the time for her daughter to take up talking to thin air and pretending it was her father. She started forward to put an end to it, but stopped when she felt a rush of cold air blow around her. Something whispered to her. It was muffled. Gaping, Lily ran towards Becca. She snatched her daughter up in her arms and ran from the room.

"Daddy!" Becca-Rose screamed, reaching over her shoulder towards the vacant room.

The gusting wind followed Lily down the hall and she thrust the front door open. Strong arms grabbed hold of her and she screamed.

"Lily!" Brayen shouted.

"Brayen?" She threw herself against him, smashing Becca-Rose between the two of them. "Something was in the room with Becca. I heard it... It was cold, like ice," she panted.

Brayen touched Becca-Rose's head and she glanced up at him. "Mommy was scared of Daddy. It's just Daddy coming back to tell her to be careful and to trust you. He told me to find the man who makes the kitty noise too, that he would always love me and Mommy."

"Rebecca-Rose, you will not talk about your father like he's still here."

"But he is, Mommy," Becca-Rose protested.

"Yes, he is," Brayen said, looking directly at her. She hadn't intended to be insensitive, and yes, biologically speaking her father was here, but that wasn't what she'd meant.

A cold blast of wind blew past them and on it came the whisper of Lily's name. Brayen pulled them both out of the house. He hustled them towards his jeep and didn't stop until they were safely inside.

Lily buckled Becca-Rose into the backseat and waited for Brayen to climb in. "You felt it too?"

"Yeah, and I heard it as well," he said, starting the jeep.

## Chapter Nine

Brayen carried Becca-Rose into his home and took her up to the loft. He kissed her gently as he tucked her under the covers and brushed the hair from her face. He'd ached to see her tiny face again and had made the decision to just show up on her doorstep. Lily hadn't returned one of his calls and had asked him to stay away. He'd honored that wish for six months, until he was no longer able to bear not seeing them.

Renee had understood and given him a call to tell him that if he wanted to catch Lily and Becca-Rose he needed to act fast—they were moving away. The thought of never seeing Lily or his daughter again sickened him, and he was happy he'd decided to go to them. He needed them and they needed him, no matter what Lily thought.

Becca-Rose purred softly in her sleep and Brayen smiled. She was his. It didn't matter that she called another man daddy—she was totally his. It was as plain as the dimple on her face and her ever-changing eyes—she was his.

Every night since the moment he'd learned she existed, he'd looked up at the sky and wondered what his little girl was doing. He'd even stood on the sidelines at Jack's funeral, hidden away—just to be sure she was okay. Now, she was here, in his home, where she belonged, where they both belonged.

He turned to find Lily and stopped when Becca-Rose cried out softly in her sleep. She opened her eyes and looked directly at him. "Daddy?"

"It's just me. Brayen," he whispered.

She nodded her head. "I know, but Daddy told me you're my daddy now and that you're special like me. He said you'll love me like he did. Will you love me like he did?"

"Yes, Rebecca-Rose, I will..." She was asleep again before he got the words out of his mouth. He still wasn't sure how to be a parent, but he knew he'd never let anything happen to her and that he'd ached to hold her to his chest and to hear her sweet voice again. If that was part of being a parent then he'd do just fine.

It saddened him Becca-Rose felt the need to talk like Jack was still there, but after the incident at the house, Brayen wondered if he really was. He glanced around the loft and shook his head in approval. The moment he'd returned home after learning of Becca-Rose, he'd redone the upstairs area of his expansive cabin just for her. Sanding the wood for her new bed and building the dresser from scratch had been all he had to occupy himself with while he gave Lily her required time to grieve.

The three-story dollhouse he'd made Becca-Rose caught his eye and he hoped when she woke it would catch hers too. He kissed her lightly on the head and turned to climb down the stairs. He took a deep breath and knew Lily was on the porch. Come hell or high water, that woman was going to talk to him.

Brayen thrust the screen door open and headed out to her. She stood there with her arms wrapped tightly around her body, holding her cell phone in one hand.

"Who did you call?" he asked.

"Lewis. I was supposed to meet with him and sign some papers tonight. I didn't want him worried about us."

*Fat chance of that*, Brayen thought.

Lily shivered slightly. He knew she was cold. The night breeze had picked up. He wrapped his arms around her petite frame and pulled her back against his body. She stiffened.

"Dammit, Lily. Stop. I love you."

Her head fell back against him as she touched his arms lightly. "I wonder every day if I hadn't gotten in my car and drove to the *Igmú*, would Jack still be alive?"

"You wouldn't have Becca. *We* wouldn't have Becca-Rose," he said, avoiding the desire to defend their love for one another.

"No, we wouldn't. Would we?" She dropped her head down and let out a deep breath. "What in the world does *Igmú* even mean?"

Brayen smiled in spite of himself. "It means cat in the Lakota native tongue."

"I should have known, *Cougs*."

Lily turned in Brayen's arms and let him hold her tight to him. She'd dreamt of a moment like this for over six years but hated the price she'd paid for it. Still, being in Brayen's arms felt right and seeing him carrying Becca-Rose to bed made her guilty for keeping them apart for so long.

"Brayen, I screwed up everything. Every choice I made was a bad one. I didn't mean to hurt you, Jack, Becca-Rose, anyone."

His lips crashed down on hers, barely giving her time to breathe let alone think. His tongue dove in and found hers ready and willing. She clawed at his back and he pressed his mouth down on her even harder. His hands roamed up her back and stopped when he reached her neck. He jerked her head back from him.

Brayen's eyes burned amber and a gasp escaped her throat. She pressed her fingers to her swollen lips and tried to back away from him. He held tight to her neck. "No," he said, his voice raspy and deeper than normal. "You won't run anymore. This is what I am, who I am, and this is what *our* daughter is. You'll accept it now, Lillian. You've no other choice."

"Brayen?"



He thought seeing him shift and knowing what he was had driven her away? It hadn't. It was what she overheard Mason saying and the price she knew the others like him would demand he pay in order to protect their secret.

Brayen took a deep breath and smiled, showing that his teeth were now elongated. Lily yelped and pushed on his chest. "Brayen, no. Don't do this. Please don't do this."

"I've wanted you for six years, Lily. Six damn years!" He jerked her face towards his and snarled at her. "You carried my child in there." He cupped her sex harder than was comfortable and backed her up against the railing. "I didn't get to share that with you. I didn't get to be there with you, to watch your belly grow with the life I helped create. I didn't get to hold her in my arms and tell her how much I loved her and I didn't get to be there the first time she experienced this—" He let go of her neck and allowed claws and fur to sprout forth from his hand. Lily gasped, but he held tight to her. "I should have been there to help her get through it."

"I'm sorry, Brayen, please." She jerked back when his claws came near her face. Hot tears burned her cheeks as she watched the mix of hate and pain on Brayen's face. "What do you want me to say? I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "No, tell me how you could disappear after you claimed to love me? Tell me the truth, *Lillian*."

"I'm sorry," she panted.

Brayen's clawed finger touched her cheek and he applied enough pressure to let her know he could hurt her if he wanted to. "The truth!"

"I heard you talking to Mason," she blurted. Brayen jerked his hand away. "I heard him tell you that humans couldn't know about shifters and that I needed to be dealt with, turned or killed." She looked into his amber eyes and watched as blue pushed its way through. "I also heard you agree to handle the situation yourself. I ran from you, terrified by what I'd seen, what I heard and what you were willing to do to me to protect it. I knew I was pregnant before I left. I had a gut feeling, and I wasn't about to let you or Mason harm our child. I knew the baby would be special. I knew she'd have your gifts and I didn't care, Brayen. I loved you so much that I'd do anything to hang on to a piece of you and that meant running before you or Mason could stop me."

Brayen's brows came together, leaving a crease on his forehead. "Lily, you only heard part of the conversation. I told Mason I planned to announce you as my mate to protect you in the shifter community. He agreed to support my decision." He reached for her and she took another step back, hitting the railing hard. "I've loved you from the moment I laid eyes on you. I'd never harm you or our child. I'd die to protect you both."

Lily shook her head in disbelief. "I thought... I thought..." Her legs gave out from under her as the realization that she'd walked out on the love of her life sunk in.

Brayen's arms wrapped around her and he lifted her in the air. "I'm sorry you heard that. I didn't know."

"I love you, Brayen. I always have."

## Chapter Ten

Brayen carried Lily inside and walked her directly to his bedroom. Hearing her say she loved him had chased away the hurt. She'd thought he would kill her to protect his secret. He would have run as well if he were in her position. She'd done what she'd thought was right for their unborn child and he couldn't blame her for that. He wouldn't. He had a healthy daughter and Lily back. He'd want for nothing again.

"I need you tonight, Lily."

"I've needed you since the night I met you."

He dropped his head down and clutched her to him tight. "I'm so sorry."

"No, don't apologize. I made more than my fair share of mistakes. Let's just be happy that we found each other again. I don't want to think about how much time we missed out on with each other—with Becca-Rose."

"Have I told you that I love her name?" He stopped for a moment and planted a kiss on the bridge of her nose. "Have I told you that I love her and that I love you?"

"I knew in my heart that you'd love her, but I was so scared of what the rest of the shifters would force you to do that I couldn't risk her. I couldn't let anything happen to our baby."

Her words ripped at him, pulling at his gut, forcing unshed tears to his eyes. "Shh, beautiful. Don't do this. Don't take the blame on yourself."

"But Brayen, you didn't get to be with me when I had her. You didn't get to hear her first word. See her take her first steps."

Kissing her again, he moved his hand up and under her shirt, needing to have skin to skin contact with her. "So tell me, what was her first word?"

Lily let out a half sob, half laugh. "Kitty."

Brayen's laughter spilled forth from him as he cupped his mate's breast.

*My mate.* The words sounded even sweeter in his mind as he replayed them.

He moved over her slowly. "Can I have more than the weekend?"

Lily looked up at him, her eyes wide. "You can have me for a lifetime if you want me."

"Oh, I want you Lily. I want you more than life itself."

He dropped his lips down onto hers, losing himself in the taste of her mouth. Peaches. He loved the way she tasted. He pulled at her clothes, letting a claw extend from his hand as he went. There would be no barriers between them now.

Brayen moved down Lily's body, needing to taste her, see her, touch her again. It had been so long—too long. His cock throbbed with the need to be buried in her, but first he needed to taste her. Take her scent in.

Licking his way down her, he made her moan when he parted her legs, exposing her quim to him. "Lily," he said, sinking his face into her folds. He lapped up the cream that oozed from her tight channel before putting his mouth over her swollen clit. Sucking gently, he inserted two fingers into her, feeling his cock harden to the point of pain as she tightened around him.

She clawed at his head, pulling his hair as she ground her hips into his face. He let out a throaty laugh as he continued to roll her clit around in his mouth. He knew the instant that she came. Her fingers dug deep into his hair and her pussy clenched down on his fingers. Brayen was nowhere near done with his assault on her and continued to lick her and pump his fingers into her until she was left with no choice but to try to crab walk away from him.

Grabbing hold of her hips and kneading his fingers into her ass, he pulled her back to him. "No you don't. I intend on making sure you never leave me again," Brayen said, nibbling playfully at her core.

"Oh, really? Want to tell me your plan?"

He kissed her inner thigh before moving up her body and positioning the head of his cock at her entrance. "Mmmhmm, it involves me sticking my dick into you, making you beg for more, before I deposit my seed into you."

Her eyes widened and she shook her head slightly. "Brayen, you can't come in me. I'm not on any sort of birth control."

A feral grin crossed over his face. "I know."

"But..."

"But what, Lily? I have my family back now and I intend to watch it grow. You and Becca-Rose are my life. According to shifter law, you have been my wife from the moment I marked you, and I intend on honoring that vow to you. I love you, woman."

Putting her fingers over his lips, she smiled up at him with tears in her eyes. "All I've ever wanted was to hear you say those words to me. Now, shut up and fuck me."

A shaky laugh fell from his lips. "I believe that very phrase got you in trouble once before. Did it not?"

She smiled. "I was hoping you'd punish me."

"Oh, I will, beautiful. All in good time, but right now I just want to make love to you. Will that do?"

"Only if you promise to give me another wonderful child."

"Beautiful, I'll soak you to the point there is no question. And we will be blessed with another. I'm sure of it. I want to see your belly swell with the life I put in it."

"You say that now, when you want some."

He sank his cock deep within her, silencing her. She clutched onto his arms as he continued his onslaught, not wanting to ever be without the feeling of Lily beneath him again. He pressed into her again and fought to keep claws from springing forth from his fingertips. The excitement and thrill of being in her again was almost too much.

“Yes, Bray. I’m coming, Brayen. I’m coming.”

“That’s it, beautiful.” His balls jerked up as he ejaculated in her for what felt like an eternity.

## Chapter Eleven

Lily kissed Brayen's forehead lightly before tiptoeing out of the room. She checked on Becca-Rose before slipping her shoes on and putting on one of Brayen's thick shirts. Opening the front door slowly, she stepped out into the night.

When she'd woken to the feel of what she was sure was her ovum accepting Brayen's seed, it took everything in her to keep from waking him. She wanted to share the news with him and would as soon as she was able to confirm it. Becca-Rose would love being a big sister. She'd always wanted someone else like her and now she not only had her father, but also a baby brother or sister.

The sound of a twig cracking brought Lily out of her trance. She looked out and over the large, wooded lot. The cabin rentals were down the hill a bit, along with the bar. The thought of a stray drunk shifter scared the hell out of her. Turning to head back into the cabin, she exhaled and then froze when she heard the sound of her name.

"Jack?" she called, unsure if she'd really heard him, or if it was just the wind.

*Lillian.*

"Jack?" She ran down the porch and towards the sound of the voice. She'd meet her fate head on. If he'd come back to punish her then so be it. He'd been a wonderful man and she would always love him.

*Run!*

The sound of Jack's voice telling her to run sent her into a panic, but instead of heeding his warning, she remained locked in place.

There was a clicking sound behind her as a cold, hard object pushed against the back of her head. "If you scream, I will shoot you and whoever else comes running out of that door."

"Lewis?"

He rammed the end of the gun into her head. "Shut your fucking mouth, squaw. Now, move!" He pushed her towards the woods.

She bit back the scream that was on the tip of her tongue, afraid Brayen and Becca-Rose would hear her and run out to their deaths. Her feet stopped working right, and she fell two times before Lewis finally grabbed hold of her arm and began to drag her down the side of the mountain. When they were a good distance from the cabin he pushed her down to the ground.

Lewis glared down at her, his eyes wild and locked on her. "It was supposed to be you."

Lily shook her head slightly, not wanting to upset him, but unsure what it was he was talking about.

He pointed his gun down at her. "In the car, you stupid bitch. The day Jack died. It was supposed to be you and that mongrel abomination of an offspring. Not my brother." His voice was wild and high.

The realization of what he'd just confessed sunk in and Lily had to swallow down the vomit rising in her throat. "No, Lewis?"

He hit her hard across the face with the back of his hand. "I had the car tampered with so that you would die and take that freak with you. Jack deserved better than you...you stain. How could you spread your legs for a monster? Give birth to one? Then force my brother to raise it as his own? You sicken me."

"Becca-Rose is not a monster," she said, shutting up when she saw the hate flicker through his eyes. It mattered not what he said. She knew in her heart that her daughter was pure.

"I did the blood work, bitch. I know she's not human and when I told Jack he confessed all her little secrets to me. The eyes changing, the strength, the reflexes, the speed and that growl." He laughed manically. "He wanted me to track down others like her and seek their help so he could teach her how to control her 'gifts'. How the hell the man could call them gifts was beyond me. You poisoned him against me. Against our mother. And you used him. I'm sorry he died, but at least your meal ticket went when he did."

"I loved Jack."

"Never speak his name! Never." He struck her again, this time with a closed fist. Lily's vision blurred and she fought to stay conscious. A metallic taste filled her mouth. Lewis said something to her, but her ears were ringing too loudly for her to make it all out. When she didn't answer right away, he struck her again.

"Answer me, bitch. What did you do to him? Did you use your Indian magik to put some kind of spell on him or did you use this?" he asked, dropping down and cupping her sex quickly.

She jerked away from him, only to have him reach down and claw at her pajama bottoms. They tore away easily for him and she screamed as he thrust a finger into her. "That's it, isn't it? You used this to lure him away from us. Tell me, if I fuck you too, will I be as hooked? Will I be willing to give up my career, my money, my pride?"

Lily kicked at him only to have her shot deflected as if she were no more than an insect. "Do that again and I'll start shooting you in places that won't kill you. I want you alive while I take my turn with you. You've let every other man in the world in there. Why not me too?"

He unfastened his pants and let the length of himself spring free. She drew in a sharp breath and tried to scramble away from him. He pinned her down quickly, positioning himself above her.

Something pushed on Brayen's shoulder. It roused him from his deep sleep with a start. He snarled and jerked upright, only to find Becca-Rose's blue eyes wide and terrified.

"Daddy?"

The sound of her sweet voice calling him daddy melted his heart. He looked down, suddenly very happy Lily had insisted he put on some pajama bottoms. He'd been used to sleeping in the buff. He reached out to Becca-Rose and lifted her up onto the end of the bed, glancing over to see if he'd wakened Lily with his antics.

Lily was gone.

"Lily?" he called softly, terrified she may have fled again. The only comfort he had was that Becca-Rose was still here and he knew Lily would never leave her.

Becca-Rose jerked her head around wildly. "Hurry, Daddy. He's got her."

"Did you have a bad dream, sweetie?"

She shook her head and dark curls fell into her face. Brayen brushed them back and smiled at her. "Let's get you back into bed and I'll send Mommy up to tuck you in, okay?"

Her eyes flashed to amber and she clawed out fast at his bare chest. Her cut was shallow but still stung all the same. "Rebecca-Rose!"

"My other daddy told me to wake up and get you. He said Mommy was in trouble and that she and the new baby would get hurt real bad if I didn't wake you up. So get up already."

Becca-Rose's words sunk in and Brayen remembered his first meeting with Lily, when the spirits of the land had rushed in the door and pushed them together. She'd been able to feel them, so it stood to reason Becca-Rose might very well be able to communicate with them as well. If that was the case, then Jack had reached out from the spirit realm to help Lily.

Brayen jumped to his feet, taking Becca-Rose with him. "Did he say anything else?"

"Uh-huh, that Uncle Lewis is sick and that he was the one who made Daddy go away from us."

Uncle Lewis? Brayen's stomach dropped when he realized Lewis had been the one behind Jack's accident. He also remembered how Jack's car had been blocked in so he'd borrowed Lily's.

Oh gods. Lewis wanted Becca-Rose and Lily dead.

"*Brother?*" The sound of Mason's voice pumped through his head. He was attuned to Brayen's feelings and no doubt sensed his fear.

*"Lily's in trouble. She can't be too far from here."*

*"I'll get everyone out. We'll find her."*

Brayen looked at his daughter and set her on the bed gently. "I need for you to be a big girl and stay right here. I have to go find Mommy. I'll send someone to be with you. If you smell Uncle Lewis coming, run and hide. I'll find you. I promise."

"I want to come too!"

"Becca-Rose, sweetie, I don't have time to argue with you. He'll hurt Mommy if I don't get to him."

"And the baby?"



Lily was pregnant again? He'd think more on that once he knew she was safe. "Yes, sweetie, and the baby."

"I'll stay here."

"Good girl. I love you." He kissed her cheek and ran for the door.

*"Mason, have two of our people come to my cabin immediately. My daughter needs their protection."*

*"Daughter? Cougs, you've got some explaining to do. I didn't want to question how it was Lily was back but a daughter too? Start talkin'."*

*"All in good time, brother. I need my wife back first."*

*"Consider it done,"* Mason said.

Brayen hit the front screen door with such a force that he tore it clean off its hinges. It didn't matter. All that mattered to him was his family. He'd do anything to protect them.

He drew in a sharp breath and tried to find Lily's scent. The wind seemed to close in around him, pulling him towards the left-hand side of the property. The air had a male feel to it and he knew right away that Jack was there, guiding him to Lily.

"I'll find her and bring home safe," he whispered to the wind as he ran through the forest.

He heard Lily's cries before he saw her. His heart went to his throat and it felt as though time stood still when he saw her pinned to the ground, her legs spread wide, and Lewis above her. Lily struck out at Lewis, preventing him from actually entering her.

The beast within Brayen took control, shifting him quickly into the cougar. Primal instincts took over and he lunged at Lewis's body. Scoring a direct hit, he rolled with the man a small way. He bit down fast, aiming for Lewis's throat, but coming short and clamping down on his shoulder.

Something pressed against his chest and he heard the cocking of the gun before he felt the bullet tear through him. Giving little thought to the wound, assuming it would heal instantly, Brayen held tight to Lewis's shoulder. When an overwhelming pain rippled through his body, he felt himself shifting back into human form. He struck out hard and fast, afraid that if he didn't, he'd die before Mason had a chance to get there and save Lily.

Lily scrambled to her feet as she watched Brayen, in his tan cougar form, roll with Lewis. They struggled and she heard the gun go off. Brayen's body jerked back violently. He lashed out at Lewis as he shifted back into himself. The gun flew from Lewis's hands.

Lewis laughed. "That's right," he said, clutching his bleeding neck. "I used silver bullets. Know, as you lie there dying, that I will be putting one through that child as well. No part of your bloodline will leave here tonight."

Brayen tried to get to his feet, but collapsed on the ground with a thud. Lily stopped thinking and dove for the gun. Lewis lunged at her, but he was too late. She rolled onto her back and fired it.

Lewis's eyes widened and she had to push the fact he looked so much like Jack out of her head as he tumbled down onto her. Their size difference left her pinned beneath him. Something knocked Lewis's body off her and she screamed when she saw the head of dark hair and large brown eyes looking down at her.

"It's safe now, Lily. It's me, Mason."

"Mason?" She let him help her up, unconcerned with how exposed she was to him. Her only thought was Brayen. He hadn't moved since he fell. She crawled over to him, sobbing. "Brayen... No."

Lily turned his body and pulled his head on to her lap. "Brayen, no, don't leave me. Please don't leave me... Don't leave Becca-Rose."

Mason touched her shoulder gently. "I need to take him to Running Elk. My people will escort you back to the cabin. They're with your daughter now."

"I can't leave Brayen."

Mason scooped Brayen up in his arms. "He's my brother, Lily. I would give my life to save his if that's what it takes. He needs the help of our shaman."

Grabbing her mouth to keep from screaming, she nodded.

## Epilogue

“No fair, you’re cheating again, Uncle Mason,” Becca-Rose said, with her tiny hands on her hips.

Mason looked shocked by her accusation. “Why you... I never cheat. I am the world’s greatest checker player ever. Bow to me, little one.”

“Oh, please,” Becca-Rose replied flippantly. “It’s getting deep in here, Uncle Mason.”

Lily’s mouth dropped open. “Rebecca-Rose! Who did you learn that from?”

Becca-Rose giggled and Mason turned red.

“Lillian, I may have sort of slipped up.”

“Mason,” Lily scolded, doing her best to hide her laughter.

“Uncle Mason, wanna have another tea party?”

Mason groaned, glancing up at Lily for help. She shook her head and laughed. “Oh, no way I’m getting you out of that one, buddy. You said kids were a breeze and that you didn’t see what the big deal was.”

“That’s before I got a good dose of your daughter,” Mason said, winking at her.

Strong arms slid around Lily’s waist. “What’s wrong with my little girl?” Brayen asked, running his hands over her swollen belly. “I love you,” he whispered in her ear.

“I can hear that,” Mason grunted sardonically.

“Like I care,” Brayen shot back. He slid his hand lower and Lily felt the baby kick as if he knew his daddy was touching him. “Oh, he’s a feisty one.”

“He sure is,” Lily agreed.

Brayen stepped around to her side and bent his head, his lips pressed to her stomach. “Hey, Jack.”

She tensed, still unsure about his desire to name their son after Jack. Brayen insisted. He said the man had filled his shoes, loving his wife and daughter and that in the end, even after he was gone, he made sure to protect all of them—including the baby.

Brayen winked up at her. “I hope he gets my height. Becca-Rose is tiny. Like her mommy. Hope our son can at least see above countertops.”

Lily pushed on his face, shaking her head as she laughed. “You’re horrible.”

He resumed his position behind her with his arms around her and his hands on her stomach. “I know.”

“Can I just say your children have the odds stacked against them?” Mason said, tousling Becca-Rose’s curls.

“And why is that?” Lily asked, not sure she wanted to hear his answer.

“It’s simple. They’re part kitty and stubborn as hell. They come by it honestly though.”

“I can’t wait for you to have some of your own, brother,” Brayen said with a laugh.

Mason grunted. “For that I need a woman.”

“What do you need a woman for, Uncle Mason?” Becca-Rose asked softly.

Mason opened his mouth to answer her and Brayen ran over to cover their daughter’s ears. “Oh, no you don’t!”

## About the Author

To learn more about Mandy M. Roth, please visit [www.mandyroth.com](http://www.mandyroth.com). Send an email to Mandy M. Roth at [mandy@mandyroth.com](mailto:mandy@mandyroth.com) or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Mandy: [http://groups.yahoo.com/subscribe/Mandy\\_M\\_Roth](http://groups.yahoo.com/subscribe/Mandy_M_Roth)

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*She's determined not to give in. He's determined to make her beg.*

## Point of No Return

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### *Project Exorcism, Book 3*

As head of the Sargaidia guards, Nina Janelle is accustomed to getting what she wants out of her men—in battle and in bed. These days, she's in a losing battle with her panther-shifter heat cycle, each round requiring more and more men to quell her burning need. Until she meets Commission Officer Jordan Vasil. Suddenly, only one man can satisfy her—too bad the cocky pilot grates on her very last nerve.

Nina's is the only face floating in his mind when Jordan lies alone at night, suffering from unrequited lust. It seems she'd rather slit his throat than bed him—until he finds her in debilitating pain from her efforts to subdue her urges. Ignoring her attempts to push him away, he gives her what she needs. His touch. His body.

Nina's not quite ready to concede defeat, but she needs Jordan's piloting skills to find her missing brother. Alone with him in close quarters promises to be more than distracting. Losing control could cost more than her kick-ass reputation. It could cost their lives.

*Warning: Contains a hotheaded female who doesn't like having to rely on any one let alone a man. And an equally stubborn alpha shifter male who's is more than willing to go toe to toe with her before rocking her world.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Point of No Return:*

"Nina? You're zoning off on me again. Let's get you inside. Something is wrong." Jordan reached for her but Nina took a step back.

"I'm fine, Vasil. Really." She eyed the outer perimeter fencing. Even with it there, the beauty of nature still managed to prevail. She took a deep breath in, savoring the floral scents of her home planet.

He stepped closer, his body touching hers. "The Dsendiyun group do you in?"

She cringed at the thought of the alien race that seemed to make landing on her planet a monthly affair. They were a race whose female population had dwindled to nearly nonexistent. While relatively harmless, they did tend to be very grabby while planet-side. Their ships were either the worst ships ever made or they tinkered with them prior to approaching Sargaidia's atmosphere in hopes of gaining permission to dock. She suspected that was more the case. A vessel holding nearly thirty of them had required a tow less than four days prior. In those four days, Nina had responded to more complaints from the women of her village—in regards to the Dsendiyuns nasty habit of grabbing a handful of ass whenever the opportunity presented itself—than she had to any other calls.

Jordan had accompanied her on several of the calls, finding the alien race amusing until one of them put his hand on her backside. Nina was then forced to pull Jordan off the Dsendiyun and then had to spend nearly two hours calming Jordan down. She'd spotted the same alien later that night, at a tavern in the heart of the village, and she could have sworn he was more bruised and battered than he'd been when she'd left him.

She raised one eyebrow in question. "By chance did you happen to meet up again with the Dsendiyun you were so fond of?"

He blinked incredulously. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Vasil."

"Hey, can I help the guy just happened to be where I was?" he asked, faking shock.

"And he just happened to end up looking as though a pikineius beast had at him?"

"Weird, huh?" he asked, his sexy grin setting the mood.

She snickered and found herself stepping even closer to him. He shocked her by putting an arm around her. Throwing it off should have been her first thought. It wasn't. She leaned against his muscular body and looked out at the natural beauty all around her.

Jordan stiffened a second before rubbing her arm and placing his chin lightly upon her head. "Pretty out here, isn't it?"

Nina's hand went to his chest and the act surprised her. Still, she didn't pull away. "It's one of my favorite spots to come and think. I like it because no one else seems to. Makes it peaceful, quiet."

"Do you want me to go?" he asked, tensing more.

Yes.

No.

Conflicted, Nina let out a shaky breath and found herself clutching his shirt. She lifted her head, her gaze colliding with his. Awareness prickled over her body, slow at first, then with an intensity that nearly made her moan. She wanted this to be the man who stopped the powerful burning, the nearly crippling pain of her cycle, but her mouth refused to open and ask it of him. She chose instead to simply stare up into his emerald green eyes, wondering when the next smart remark would come from him or if he'd find humor in her vulnerability.

He put his hand over hers, cupping it firmly in place. "Tell me to leave, Nina."

The way he said it sounded as if he was hoping she'd send him away. That he didn't have the willpower to do so on his own. That was ridiculous. Jordan was one of the strongest men she knew, and that wasn't even counting his stubborn streak.

"Jordan?"

His breathing was quick and shallow and his eyes narrow as he continued to meet her gaze. Was he aware of her cycle? Did the shifter in him realize she was fertile and that her body craved his?



She tried to back away but the attempt was half-hearted. He held firm to her, his breathing calming slightly. He closed his eyes and the muscles in his neck worked before he looked upon her again. He released her hand but she kept it in place on his chest. "Sorry."

Taking a deep breath, she stayed near him, drawing in his scent. Musk with a hint of spice. Under it all she could smell his cats and hated admitting how wet they made her pussy. Why did it have to be Jordan? Why did it have to be the one man on the planet who didn't bend to her whim? Who stood his ground with her. It was her luck to want the man who irritated her the most. She tipped her head as a coy smile overtook her.

Jordan winked and she giggled.

Giggled, of all things.

She wasn't one of those women yet she was fawning over a man. Even with the knowledge, Nina couldn't seem to stop herself. At best, she managed to stop grinning up at him and relax. Her gaze returned to the scenery but she stayed pressed to him. She couldn't recall a time she'd sought a man's embrace for the sheer comfort it provided. "Can I tell you something and you not have a laugh?"

"Yes," he said softly. Jordan was famous for his swift wit and temper. Hearing him agree to her terms so quickly surprised her.

"I have never been off Sargaidia. I'm not sure of what to expect out there."

He was to pilot her off the planet for their retrieval mission. They were taking a shuttle from the Alpha Brig Three and from what she'd been told, Jordan was the best man for the job. With their departure set for morning, she'd find out soon enough what it was like to leave her home planet.

"I know you've traveled extensively so this has to sound foolish to you but I'm nervous about leaving and about staying. It's all so confusing."

"I'd like to lie to you and tell you how other planets in the quadrant aren't any different than here, Nina, but I won't do that." He wrapped his arms around her fully, his hands going to the small of her back. "Sargaidia's sister planet, Margaidia, is similar in the sense of its beauty, but it's covered with a good deal of large cities as well. Buildings as tall as the eye can see, people everywhere, a lot of hustle and bustle. It's a nice mix if you're into that sort of thing. I find myself preferring Sargaidia though. Other planets differ depending on which you're talking about. Some seem to be nothing but machines now. Others seem to be no more than wasteland. Some are little but water for as far as the eye can see."

Nina did her best to soak in all that he was telling her. "You've seen so much, Vasil. How is it you're content to be here? I mean, I understand why your brother is would stay but I can't imagine our planet being able to hold someone like you to it."

There, she'd said it. She'd voiced her biggest fear. She was scared Jordan would leave. He'd been on her planet for a year and a half and she didn't expect him to stay much longer. Not a man like him. One who had seen the universe and had no commitments holding him to her planet.

He skimmed his hands up her back and cupped her neck. Heat flared through her body. "I like it here, boss, and I have no plans on leaving." A wry grin spread over his handsome face. "Unless you want me to go."

"No," she said a little too fast as she clutched his arm. Her mind screamed at her hand, ordering it to release him but she could no more pry her fingers from him than she could stop the uncontrollable urges he brought about in her. Needing to save face, she stammered out a response, "Umm, I mean, Sevan would miss you. As would your nephews."

Something Nina couldn't read moved over Jordan's face. "Yeah," he said, dipping his head, his lips closing in on hers. "He probably would."

"J-Jordan?"

His lips were so close—hovering right there. "Yeah, baby?"

She didn't scold him for the demeaning pet name. Rather, she leaned up, putting her mouth closer to his. "I should yell, right?"

He laughed softly. His fingers kneaded the back of her neck. "It does seem to be what we do best."

She focused on his lips. "What's that?"

"Yell at each other," he confessed, his thumbs caressing just below her ears. His lips skimmed hers and fire shot through her entire body. She froze, knowing if she dared to move she'd ravish the man.

He used his thumbs to tug at her jawline, pulling her mouth open slightly. "I'm gonna kiss you, baby. You all right with that?"

A second before she would have responded with a yes, Nina sensed someone nearing and pulled back from his touch, putting a good foot of space between them. Jordan reached for her and she lifted her hand to him, stopping just shy of making contact.

"For now," he whispered. "This will do."

*The wild thing she saved is the man she'll desire most.*

## Animal Instinct

© 2010 Michelle M. Pillow

### *A Ghost Cats Story*

Eve Matthews, head veterinarian at Jameson Wildlife Rescue and Preserve, measures success by no one's rules but her own—much to her rich parents' distress. A life filled with animals means she's rarely alone. Still, a little human contact of the male variety would be nice.

The only one in her life right now is Midnight, a black panther she brought back from the brink of death. She doesn't think twice about bringing him home to keep an eye on him. Changing clothes in front of his golden eyes. Confessing her deepest fantasies to his alert ears. It's not as if he'll ever tell anyone her secrets.

Forced to watch her every move, listen to her every word, Viktor is in torment, trapped in panther form while he heals. He aches to fill her nights with the pleasure she craves, but to shift too soon risks death. Until the night she pleasures herself, and he can take no more.

They come together in a cataclysm too fierce to be a dream. But the shifter who left Viktor for dead is drawing near, determined to finish the job he started.

*Warning: Contains a voyeuristic cat shifter, a heroine who's an exhibitionist unaware, and explicit sex that may just give you cat scratch fever. Iced catnip tea recommended.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Animal Instinct:*

Viktor looked over the gorgeous, unmoving woman who rested next to him on the bed. He could see her perfectly in the dim light of the bedroom. Only a soft blue glow came in from the window. She was ravishing, so much so that he couldn't take his eyes off of her. Just his luck, he'd find the first woman he truly desired and cared for in his eternity of living only to be stuck in his shifted form, unable to do anything about it.

Viktor's injuries kept him from shifting, yet, ironically it was his injuries that brought him to Eve Maitland. A fellow cat shifter named Bartel had stabbed him in the back while he was in human form. Eve's intervention saved him from being put down like a feral animal. It was only the power of the cat form and the sweet, administering hands of a sexy angel that helped him to heal. Every day he wanted to thank her, but if he tried to become human too soon, he'd die. If he stayed shifted too long, stayed in this place too long, he risked bringing his troubles to his caretaker's door. Bartel would want to finish what he started. He wasn't the kind of man to leave loose ends. Viktor was a loose end. Luckily, Eve kept him in her trailer, hidden away. But once she moved him onto the preserve, he'd be easier to track.

Eve's legs stirred against the bed as she slept. Viktor studied the long line of her body. She unintentionally tortured him day and night with her presence. She talked to him about herself, telling him secrets, whispering her fantasies, asking him questions that couldn't be answered with his animal throat. It was pure torment. She undressed before him, letting his cat eyes see her body without hesitation or thought. During his time spent under her care, he'd been afforded numerous views of her form—in the shower, the bed, dressing and undressing. A few times when she didn't know he looked, he'd watched her pleasure herself—wiggling her hips against her exploring fingers, stirring up her feminine scent until it clouded his mind, jerking and panting as she brought herself to climax with a silent cry of release. If he were shifted to human, he'd groan in anguish at the memories of watching her climax by her own hand. Since he was panther, he merely growled low in discontent.

He knew she was drunk, could smell the liquor in her veins mingling with her woman's scent—a scent that was finally driving him to the point of risking exposure, a scent so sweet it could make a man risk shifting before his body was ready. Feeling a tingling in his limbs, Viktor stiffened in surprise. Was he healed enough to finally try it?

The smell of her again filled him and a mindless urgency overcame him. Viktor urged his body to transform. She'd petted him, stroked him. It was his turn. He needed to touch her with his flesh, had to know if her skin was as soft and supple and sweet as he imagined. It had been a long time and the transformation hurt like hell. He endured the pain exploding in his limbs, popping his joints, extending his bones and retracting his canines. An imaginary fire burned across his flesh, pulling his skin to the point it felt as if he might rip in half. Sore muscles twinged and hardened, cramping violently. He'd come too far. He couldn't stop it now, not as he shifted to human once more. Black fur was slowly replaced by tanned flesh. His muscles lengthened and stretched, arching and curling until they molded into a hard, masculine frame. The bed shook and Eve moaned. Her hand reached out, absently petting his shifting shoulder as she slept. The touch brought him little comfort. His lips parted in a silent, agonizing scream. And then, finally, it was finished.

Viktor took a deep breath, trembling weakly as he readjusted to the energy it took to be in the larger form. His skin pulled tightly against his frame and his joints ached. He knew he wouldn't be able to stay a man for too long—not yet anyway. But once he was completely healed, the human form would again be his dominant shape.

Lying naked on the bed, he looked at Eve with his dark human eyes. His cock stood erect and ready and he couldn't discern whether it was from the rush of blood through his shifting body or the knowledge that he'd finally be able to satisfy that deep curiosity. Though his vision was sharper as a cat, he could see her soft lines perfectly. Delicate material cupped her breasts, revealing shape but not texture. His fingers twitched. One touch. That was all he'd take. One small touch. He had to know.

Running a masculine hand down his ribcage, he suppressed a groan. He was lying to himself. If he touched her now, in this state, he'd never stop. His eyes flickered down Eve's body only to come up again, landing once more on the soft rise and fall of her round breasts. His long, tapered fingers wrapped around his thick cock. Shifters weren't known for suppressing their sexual appetites and it had definitely been too long since he'd indulged his. The heavy length of his shaft lurched and throbbed beneath his hand as he stroked it.

His mind whispered wicked thoughts to his body. *She said she wanted a wild man to take her. She asked for it. She wants it. You want it. Think of how her skin will taste. Think of how fragile her flesh is. Think of how wet she smells between the thighs.*

Moving with liquid grace, he turned onto all fours and crawled to be closer to the woman on the bed. His breath came in hard gulps as he looked at her. He was a fool to think he could ever resist. He'd been forced to gaze at her creamy breasts and athletically smooth thighs for too long. He wanted a closer look. He wanted to touch her, taste her. He wanted to fuck her. He wanted to make her scream his true name.

Viktor licked his lips and sat back on his heels. Sexy lace panties hugged her narrow hips, the straps falling over where her hipbones protruded slightly from her skin. He knew when he pulled them down that he'd find a narrow patch of dark blonde hair guarding her opening.

Her thighs parted slightly as she stirred next to him on the bed. He couldn't resist lowering his face between them to breathe in her exotic feminine smell. Without thought, his lips parted and his long tongue reached forward to taste her through the silken barrier.

Eve lurched against him at the contact, wiggling and moaning in her sleep. A soft pant came from her lips and her legs fell open to him as she inadvertently begged him for more. Viktor grinned and could not deny her plea.

"Mmm," he moaned in the back of his throat, bathing her panties with his tongue until they were soaked and clinging to her hot, moist pussy. His breath hit against her. He could taste the sweet cream of her body trying to saturate the silk.

He pulled back and she whimpered lightly. She reached for her own breast and began massaging. Her legs stirred as she mumbled, "No, don't stop. Please, don't stop."

Hearing her soft, sleepy voice, he couldn't help but obey it. His fingers ran up her warm thighs to grab her panties from her hips. He worked them down, off her body. Seeing the soft glistening of her drenched pussy, he adjusted her on the bed and spread her legs wide to him.

As his mouth latched onto her clit, drinking furiously, his fingers rode up her flat stomach to help her massage her breasts. Their fingers intertwined on the soft globes. With a rip, he tore open the bra, freeing the mounds to his searching fingers. He rubbed the nipples, pinching and squeezing them into hard buds. His teeth nipped lightly, making her squirm against him. He moaned and dipped his long tongue into her slick channel for a deeper taste.

Though his cock protested, his mouth would not give up its newfound pleasure. Muscles tried to grip his tongue as it swept inside her. Her thighs squeezed his head. She sighed softly, moaning for more.

And, oh, Viktor wanted to give her more.

*They believed the evil was destroyed. They were wrong.*

## Revenge

© 2010 Jaycee Clark

### *A Ghost Cats Story*

It took Reya Lynx a long time to learn to live with her animal half, but now she's perfectly content as a gallery owner in Taos. She's lived longer, loved more, even died more than most. Enough to have ceased caring what anyone thinks of her, least of all the one man she's managed to steer clear of—until now. Her mate.

Lorenzo Craigen, leader of the southwest mountain lions, is a cop, and a damn good one. A recent string of murders seems all too familiar, and it's not something he can exactly share with his colleagues. The last time he faced a killer like this, it was a long time ago. As in centuries. And that's why he has sought out Reya, whether she likes it or not.

Reya can't believe the sadistic shaman who left her haunted with brutal memories—and tore her and Lo apart—has come back from the dead. There's only one way to find out. Bite the bullet and work with him to solve the murders. And try to resist the re-ignited heat between them...while a killer waits for the perfect moment to serve up cold, cold revenge.

*Warning, this title contains the following: A sexy hero with no mercy when it comes to protecting his mate, an independent heroine who doesn't want to be his mate—or so she claims, and a villain bent on revenge.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for The Revenge:*

Lo watched her talk, the way her hands moved, the way the low light caught with a dull sheen on the wide silver bracelet she wore, the way it winked from the dark black stone of her pendant.

The pendant he'd given her still hung around her neck, between her breasts. Her eyes might glare at him, and he knew she might never fully trust him again, not like she had once upon a time, but she still felt *something* for him. She still wore the damn pendant. He remembered the little jeweler from the shop in Spain.

Shaking off the memories of the past, he focused on what she was saying. "I want another drink."

He motioned to the waitress. Other tables had already seen their share of diners come and go, but they'd stayed, talking more than eating and she'd already had three margaritas. Not that he really cared. But she'd never been one to drink and when she did, it didn't take much for her to get wasted. He wondered what she was trying to get away from. He wondered at that flicker of fear he'd caught in her eyes when she'd mentioned *threatening*. His jaw tightened at the thought.

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright with the tequila and whatever other poison, probably triple sec, they mixed in their margaritas. "So glum. Why so serious? You were always so serious, Lorenzo Craigen."

"And you were always laughing."

She waved a hand. "That was before." Plopping her chin on her fist, she asked. "So why a cop?"

"Can you honestly see me as a banker?"

She chuckled and the sound pulled a smile from him. Definitely enough drinks.

"Nope. Though you're driven enough you could have your own business again, just like before." She leaned over as if to whisper something and he couldn't help but glance to the vee of her dress and admire the view of her cleavage. He slowly ran his gaze up, noting the pound of her pulse in her neck, the way her collarbone dipped and curved, the way the candlelight made her appear even more beautiful.

Without thinking, he reached over, his hand curving around the back of her neck, to tangle in the silkiness of her upswept hair. He leaned towards her. Stopping just shy of laying his lips on hers, he looked in her eyes, saw the excitement and the want there. Smiling, he kissed her. Her lips were as soft beneath his as he remembered. She still tasted of cool desert evenings and warm sun-drenched mornings.

Her lips parted beneath his and he tilted his head, deepening the kiss. Reya swayed, her hand gripping his thigh to stay upright.

It was she who pulled back, and the fact they were in public was the only reason he let her. She licked her lips, her eyes staring at his mouth as she whispered, "I wish you would have stayed away." Then she frowned. "Or I wish I had."

Lorenzo tightened the hand at her nape. "We don't always get what we wish for."

He jerked her to him and kissed her like he wanted to, felt his inner soul claw to get out. The damn woman would make him forget his own head. Abruptly, he pulled back. He ran his hand from her neck, over her shoulder, down the bare inside of her arm and felt her shiver as she watched him. "We're leaving."

He tossed enough bills on the table to cover the meal and drinks, nodded to the waitress as they made their way off the little patio and to his Dodge pickup truck.

"Boys and toys," she muttered.

"And how the hell practical is a damn Beemer when the roads are covered in ice and the ground in snow?"

She walked with him to the driver's side and climbed in, sliding over to the middle seat and straddling the stick shift.

He started to tell her to move over and buckle up, but to hell with it. He climbed in after her, his truck rumbling to life. He shifted the truck into reverse and couldn't help but notice how his hand grazed the inside of her thigh, and with that damn flirty little skirt, it didn't do much to help him out.

Lo cursed as he turned the truck out of the parking lot and pulled onto the highway.



“I don’t want to go home yet.” Her voice was lower than normal. “I want to see where you live.”

Yeah, he’d make it through this night. He had no intention of sleeping with her tonight. None. She was drunk. She’d regret it. She’d blame him. Plus, they had things to talk about. Important things to plan. Not...not... Well, damn.

He hadn’t *planned* on getting her into his bed. Hoped, but didn’t actually plan on it. At least not tonight. He’d have to work at it. Without a doubt, she’d make him work hard to get her back into his bed, let alone his life. At least that was what he had assumed. But if she wanted him...

Drunk. She was drunk.

The beast in him said, *Shut up and stop arguing. Take her.*

Damn it, if Reya didn’t still twist him up into freaking knots.

The memory of what it was like to be inside her, to have her lithe limbs wrapped around him as she came apart in his arms shattered through his well-meant plans. He reached over and flipped the stereo on, punching the scan button on the radio. It landed on a cultural station.

“I should take you home,” he said through his teeth as he shifted again, his hand once again grazing a thigh. Again he shifted into a higher gear, leaving his hand all too close to the heat of her, tangling memories with reality. He knew what she tasted like just there on the inside of her knee and how hot she got the higher up those silky thighs he travelled.

He fisted his hand on the steering wheel.

Her hand on his thigh tightened as she leaned over and nipped his ear. “I said I don’t want to go home, Lo.”

When they were on open highway, he rested his hand on her thigh, the skirt bunched up so that bare skin met his.

He stared at the highway and tried not to think about what lay a few inches from his fingers.

The ride to his home outside of town flew by in a blur. His sprawling one-story adobe house sat a few miles off the highway at the base of the *Sangre de Cristos* on a hundred-acre ranch. Not that he had time to ranch, though he did keep a couple horses in the barn for when he felt like riding.

Like now.

But it wasn’t his horses he wanted to ride all damn night long.

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