



Savage
SANCTUARY

JACQUELINE BARBARY



Sexy bad boy shapeshifter Michael O'Dare grew up on the streets. When government soldiers finally captured and imprisoned him, he became a lab rat and a collared slave, never again allowed to be human. His escape allowed him to return to human form, and head for freedom in the Western Territories.

Robert Hamilton-Scott had lived by the code "you're careful, or you're caught" for too long to take chances now. The one risk he takes in his carefully controlled life is offering temporary shelter to shifters on the run like Michael.

Robert knows it's definitely not safe to want the sexy renegade he's giving sanctuary to—passion is dangerous for a shapeshifter. As the soldiers close in he must choose between the careful life he's built or life on the run with the man who has captured his heart.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for purchasing this Carina Press launch title. During our journey these past months to acquire manuscripts, develop relationships with authors and build the Carina Press catalog, we've been working to fulfill the mission "Where no great story goes untold."

If you'd asked me what I'd be doing a year ago, I never would have conceived I'd be working with the brilliant team behind Harlequin's digital program to bring you a new and exciting digital first imprint. I have long been a fan of Harlequin books, authors and staff and that's why I'm so pleased to be sharing these first Carina Press launch titles with you.

At Carina Press, we're committed to bringing readers great voices and great stories, and we hope you'll find these books as compelling as we do. In this first month, you'll find a broad range of genres that showcase our promise to Carina Press fans to publish a diversity of content. In the coming months, we'll add additional genres and continue to bring you a wide range of stories we believe will keep you coming back for more.

We love to hear from readers, and you can e mail us your thoughts, comments and questions to generalinquiries@carinapress.com. You can also interact with Carina Press staff and authors on our blog, Twitter stream and Facebook fan page.

Happy reading!
~Angela James

Executive Editor, Carina Press
www.carinapress.com
www.twitter.com/carinapress
www.facebook.com/carinapress

Savage Sanctuary

Jacqueline Barbary



Chapter One

“Why are his hands tied?” Robert Hamilton-Scott shouted over the wind that drove stinging rain against his face.

“Because I value my life,” Trevor Hardy yelled back. The leader of the resistance wasn’t a cautious man. Hardy was a bear even though he was one hundred percent human. Six feet three and at least two hundred twenty pounds, he dwarfed the other resistance fighters beside him.

His words caused Robert to squint his eyes against the weather to get a closer look at the fugitive shape-shifter Hardy and two others hauled to his front door.

Tall and muscular, the shape-shifter male they supported was also worse for wear. His jeans were mud-splattered, torn and dark with moisture. Pale skin flashed through them in many places. Of course, he could also see much more skin elsewhere, because the man’s torso was bare. His shirt, if the scraps of material hanging from his arms had been a shirt, was shredded almost beyond recognition, leaving the ridges of his abdomen to channel the streams of rainwater as if they were rapids.

Robert tore his gaze away from those ripples to help get the man inside. His home was a safe house among hundreds of others in a network that formed a trail from the United States to the Free Western Territories. Inspired by Harriet Tubman’s Underground Railroad, the Network provided aid and shelter to shape-shifters escaping government research.

This shifter was barely conscious. He stumbled and shuffled his feet as two men and one woman pulled him up

the porch steps to the door of Hamilton Croft. Even with his head down and his shoulders slumped, sturdy rope around his wrists and three people holding his arms, the man was threatening—savage enough to give Robert pause.

“He’s been in the labs for a year or more,” Merry Bridges gasped, explaining when the others didn’t. She didn’t let go of the big arm she held with both hands, though her grip threatened to slip on bare skin grown slippery in the downpour.

They all stopped, finally sheltered under the porch roof. It wasn’t the sudden respite from the torrential rain that caused them to pause. Robert could see his horror mirrored in the others’ eyes. They all knew what it meant for a shape-shifter to be in scientists’ hands for so long.

The scientists had less respect for shape-shifters than they had for lab rats, and the experiments they implemented put captured shifters in a living hell.

A bioengineered species was product not people.

And shifters were a product that had yet to yield maximum benefits for their creators.

“My God,” Robert choked out, shock and sympathy twisting in his gut.

For the first time, he reached out to touch the shifter. The muscled forearm he grasped was hard beneath his fingers, but those muscles had to hide a wounded soul.

At Robert’s touch, the shifter’s head jerked up, and he snarled through tangled strands of sodden hair.

“It’s all right, O’Dare. He’s a friend. We’re all friends,” growled Hardy, yanking the bound shifter back from Robert’s touch. As always, a little too solicitous for Robert’s peace of mind. Hardy wasn’t unattractive, but his overbearing attitude rubbed Robert the wrong way.

“Before he was captured and taken to the labs, Michael O’Dare was a gang baby, Robert. We probably shouldn’t

have brought him here, but there was no place else he could go," Merry explained as thunder rumbled above their heads.

A gang baby.

Born and raised in shape-shifter packs that owned the inner-city streets, gang babies learned to eschew the humanity society refused to share with them. He'd thought O'Dare was savage. He hadn't known the half of it.

"...lost cause," the third man grunted. He was a man Robert didn't recognize. The resistance was growing.

The shifter's vicious response to his touch and Merry's revelations had shaken Robert, but he opened the door and led them inside because tight, hot sympathy crowded out the fear in his chest.

"I can handle him," Robert said.

By that time they had made it upstairs to dump O'Dare onto Robert's bed. His was the closest bedroom, and he had led them there because he wasn't sure they could make it a single step farther. The storm continued to lash the house with fury, but its roar was muffled by solid walls.

O'Dare lay on the bed, quiet and shivering as if he appreciated being out of the wind and rain.

Hardy stepped back to look at Robert with skeptical eyes. His narrowed eyes and scowling lips caused Robert to square his shoulders and harden his own expression in response. He had never appreciated Hardy's scrutiny, especially because he worried *he* might be the reason Hardy was so devoted to the shifter cause.

"Michael O'Dare is notorious. There never was a more reckless shape-shifter. He grew up on the streets in a gang that may as well have been a pack for all its savagery. He didn't have a civilized bone in his body before the scientists got ahold of him. Now? He's so far gone, so wild, he might never learn to be human again. You know those bastards force the shift so they can run their 'studies.' I didn't want to bring him here..." Hardy said gruffly.

“There was nowhere else. We couldn’t put him with a family or near children,” Merry interjected.

“I can handle him,” Robert repeated, calling on generations of authority to brace his spine and firm his voice, though the inference that *he* had no family left made him ache. A Hamilton-Scott had never turned away a person in need; he wouldn’t be the first.

He moved to the bed and began to unlace O’Dare’s black boots.

“We have to go. We’ve got tracks to cover and a van to hide,” the third man urged from the doorway.

Hardy stepped close and placed a hand on Robert’s back. Robert stepped out from under its unwelcome weight.

“We’ll be back as soon as we can,” Hardy said, soothing no one but himself.

Robert nodded but didn’t look up from the muddy boots.

As the others left, the storm seemed to leave with them. The noise of the rain on the roof slacked off, and the next boom of thunder came from a distance. O’Dare’s furrowed brow and tight lips said the inner tempest he dealt with wouldn’t pass so easily. Robert moved quickly to get his “guest” warm and dry. He fetched a towel from the closet in the hall and used it to wipe O’Dare’s skin, but his quick, efficient movements still allowed for a brushing of his fingers over O’Dare’s chest, lean stomach and strong thighs. He was a beautiful man, perhaps seeming more so because of the knowledge that the scientists had stolen this body from him for extended periods of time.

Robert shuddered. His clothes were wet as well, but it was his imagination that made him shake. What O’Dare had been through exceeded Robert’s worst nightmares.

Averting his eyes as much as he could, Robert tugged wet denim from O’Dare’s legs. Then he did the same with his damp boxer shorts. Even though no one watched and O’Dare seemed oblivious, Robert’s cheeks still grew warm,

along with other things, before he had the cotton pulled free and thrown to the floor. To keep from staring, he reached for the scraps of shirt next, and they came free in his hands as if they'd never been a complete garment in the first place.

Finally O'Dare was nude and wrapped in quilts.

But one task remained.

Before he could second-guess his actions and change his mind, Robert left the room and walked down the stairs to the kitchen. There, he pulled open a drawer and took out a sharp butcher knife. Without pausing, he climbed the stairs and went back into the bedroom where he'd left O'Dare.

He might be unleashing a beast like Hamilton Croft had never seen.

That thought made him hesitate as he stood over Michael O'Dare with the knife in his hand. Though the shivering had stopped, O'Dare's body was still tense—his face tight, his jaw clenched. There was nothing reassuring about the big shape-shifter's appearance, but Robert still leaned forward and slipped the knife's blade under the ropes wrapped around O'Dare's wrists.

It took several minutes of sawing to sever the ties.

With sweat beading his upper lip and his breath held tight in his lungs, Robert cut the ropes. He readied himself for more snarls or worse.

O'Dare only moaned and sighed, turning into the pillow Robert had placed beneath his head.

Chapter Two

His guest was sleeping.

Robert stood beside the antique four-poster bed and watched the man who had tossed and turned so much during the night that the bedclothes were twisted into ineffectual knots.

He was no longer covered by his covers.

The night before, Robert had been ready for anything. He had grown used to midnight visitors needing his help. The area was becoming more and more perilous for shifters who valued their freedom. More shifters fled with each passing day. More soldiers came hunting. This morning, in the glittering sunlight that filtered in through gauzy curtains, he was nervous. He was used to helping. He just wasn't used to helping someone like *Michael O'Dare*.

The stranger sprawled across crisp white sheets with only a curled corner of quilt providing any sort of modesty at all. And it wasn't enough. Robert could see intriguing shadows, which drew him closer.

He should have placed the man's breakfast on the nearby dresser and left him to his dreams. He should have averted his eyes and directed his feet to take him into safer rooms with views of the rolling fields of his small Virginia farm and the Blue Ridge Mountains beyond.

He didn't.

He did place the plate of pancakes and fresh strawberry preserves on the dresser, but then he stepped even closer to the bed.

It wasn't wise.

The man had spent a year in the labs. He'd been through hell, and he'd probably brought some of it with him to the other side.

O'Dare lay, calm in whatever dream world he wandered. It was his quiet after a night of moaning that attracted Robert as his disquiet would not have. The rumpled sheets gave testimony to O'Dare's unrest, but as he breathed, the steady rise and fall of his chest seemed almost peaceful.

Of course, nothing else about the man seemed calm, quiet or peaceful.

His arms were thrown out wide, and his fingers were curled. Against the sheets, his arms were hard, the muscles tense even as he slept. Though his legs were tangled here and there in the colorful patchwork quilt, they, too, were spread and tense, as if he intended to leap from the bed in the next second or the next and greet the rising sun with fists raised, teeth clenched and blows ready to fall.

Even sleeping, he looked ready and willing to fight, as if he expected a battle, as if fighting was all he knew.

And yet Robert didn't stay back.

Across the pillow, hair spread out in a fan of beige and gold and brown and amber. There was even a hint of red kissed to life by a stray beam of morning sunlight. It was unabashedly shifter hair. Its natural variations in color a dangerous proclamation of who and what the man was.

Robert's hair was smoothed back and bound tightly at his neck. The mouse-brown shade he'd worn since childhood came from a bottle. The natural wildness of O'Dare's hair called to him, the brazen rebellion of those almost iridescent locks appealed to something wild in his heart that he'd never acknowledged.

O'Dare had been a prisoner of a government research lab, where it was doubtful a hair-coloring kit had been his for the asking. But O'Dare *had* been captured in the first place. Shape-shifters were either careful or they got caught.

Michael O'Dare didn't look like he'd ever been careful, not a day in his life.

The front of his thighs bumped against the mattress, and Robert was startled. He'd been so fascinated by O'Dare that he'd come too close to the bed.

He should have turned and walked away.

He should have left O'Dare and the temptation of his hair alone.

He didn't.

Robert was so close that the ozone scent of O'Dare's rain-washed skin rose to fill his nose. He breathed it in, noting that O'Dare's scent was as stormy as his spirit seemed to be.

This shape-shifter gangster was bound to be his guest for a week, if not more, before the next leg of his journey west began. He needed to wait, to rest, to recuperate. Looking at him and the tenseness that gripped his body even while he slept, Robert also suspected O'Dare wasn't a person for whom waiting or resting or recuperating had ever been an option.

He wouldn't welcome the respite.

Just as he'd been drawn too close to him seconds before, Robert reached one hand slowly and carefully toward Michael O'Dare's hair. It was seemingly harmless, mere inches away.

It wasn't smart.

It wasn't safe.

Of course, simply being a part of the Network was a risk. More so for Robert than most.

He was a shape-shifter like his mother and his grandmother before her. Since the world had split into terrorist factions, each proclaiming the other "true terrorists," the demand for shape-shifters was on the rise. Who wouldn't want strong, versatile soldiers with no rights at their beck and call?

Now, more than ever, dyed hair wasn't enough.

Robert wasn't ruled by emotion in any other aspect of his life. He'd been raised to be practical. People who lived in hiding couldn't afford spontaneity or adventure. Still, all practicality aside, he needed to touch this shifter's hair more than he needed to be safe.

And it was worth it.

For long moments, as the soft, almost liquid strands twined about his fingers, he was lost in sensation. He forgot about being careful and controlled in all things. That control was the shape-shifters' religion. It had been passed down to him through the generations as surely as his home had been.

When he touched the rebellious shifter's hair, when he held the silky strands and rubbed them between his fingers and they shimmered like he'd captured a tawny rainbow in his hands, Robert found a new religion for several catch-your-breath moments.

And then, O'Dare opened his eyes.

He would have pulled back, ashamed to be caught, but O'Dare grabbed his wrist in steely fingers at the same instant he opened his eyes.

They were gold, those eyes, a brown filled with light and fire as the morning sun turned them molten. They were also full of pain and distrust. Even knowing some of the other shifter's history hadn't prepared him for the damage in his gaze. Would O'Dare ever be capable of feeling anything else again?

Chapter Three

Michael O'Dare wasn't alone.

He grabbed for the man who touched him, because contact had been negative for far too long. He also opened his eyes, and that saved the bones in the man's wrist from a crushing grip, because the stranger he held wasn't a scientist, this aching cheerful room wasn't the lab and the man's eyes held a very unscientific sort of fascination.

In the past year, he'd been so rarely alone that it was a state he recognized even when he was driven into an exhausted sleep. He'd treasured and dreaded those moments in the lab when he was left in "peace." Treasured because they were so few and far between. Dreaded because every second alone might be his last.

The man's eyes were darker than dark, an almost chocolate-brown, too dark for the pale skin of his face. The dark paired with the light was startling, a fetching contrast that made his skin appear perfect and his expression appear vulnerable.

Michael loosened his grip, afraid he might have already marked such fine skin.

He observed everything he could about the man he held; then he took inventory of himself. Arms? Yes. Legs? Yes. Fur or feathers? No.

What passed through him might have been relief, but was tighter than that relaxed emotion. Forced to be one animal or another by the scientists who had held him prisoner, he had seldom been a man in the past year. He never woke without that quick inventory. He was a shape-

shifter—fur and feathers were in his future. It was only a matter of where and when.

That inevitability used to be a thrill, a reassurance in a world that could never be trusted. Now the fur or feathers in his future seemed threatening, tainted by the scientists who had used and abused them.

“Who are you?” he asked. His voice still sounded strange, as if his vocal cords were trying to remember how to function.

He hadn’t let the stranger go, and the man hadn’t pulled away. He could have. Michael told himself he would have let the young man move back if he’d tried, though he wasn’t sure he believed it.

Because his skin was living silk against Michael’s fingers.

It had been a very long time since his fingers had brushed against warm, smooth skin, and even then the skin had never been *this* warm or *this* smooth. Almost unbidden, he slid his thumb against the stranger’s pulse. The man’s heartbeat jumped beneath Michael’s touch, but it was the skin-to-skin glide that hypnotized him. Michael closed his eyes and focused on the friction, the contact.

Unwilling contact.

Immediately he opened his eyes and let the stranger go.

The man still didn’t move away.

His eyes held less fascination and more caution. As if Michael’s caress had given him more to worry about than his tight grip had.

“I’m Robert Hamilton-Scott, and this is my home,” he replied, his voice husky and sweet. It soothed *and seduced*.

The last took him by surprise, as did the hardening of his cock. He moved in response, allowing the blanket piled beside his hip to fall over him. Bad enough to have grabbed the stranger and glared at him. To lust for him too? He was here at the stranger’s mercy, and from the plush bed

coverings to the gleaming wooden furniture, the man's home was nicer than anywhere else Michael had ever been—even *before* the lab.

This was the man's bed, his sheets, his pillow... Michael's thoughts only made matters worse. It had been too long since he'd buried himself inside a willing partner. He suddenly ached for the closest contact a human being could have with another.

"I brought you some food," his host continued, but he didn't turn to get the plate Michael could see on a piece of furniture that belonged in a museum under lock and key, not here, holding his breakfast.

The man—*Robert*—stayed close, looking at Michael as if waiting for him to speak again.

He was going to.

Speak.

He even opened his lips and licked them in preparation, but Robert's gaze tracked the flick of his tongue, and Michael was left speechless by the unexpected desire to kiss the perfect young man, to taste him, to feel the slide of Robert's lips against his just as his thumb had slid against the skin of Robert's wrist.

The blush that rose on Robert's pale cheeks when he bit his lower lip didn't help kill the desire. In fact, Michael was so taken by that flush of rose on porcelain skin, he was struck dumb for the second time in a matter of seconds by two seemingly nonstriking actions—Robert's glance and his blush.

Simple.

Devastating.

"I'm not hungry," he stated, as much to refute other hungers as to refuse the offer of sustenance.

His sullen words brought sunshine to Robert's face. Humor lit it up until the warm beams of light from the window were weak in comparison.

Again, he was struck. Three times in less than three seconds. He didn't know why. There had been beautiful men and women in his life before the lab. Plenty.

In the city of Charlotte, North Carolina, he'd run with a dominant shifter gang. He'd been orphaned young because of gang violence. City shifters fought often for territory and for control. It was the powerful gang that provided the only family he could remember. They'd defended their territory and had enough submissive groupies to keep them well and truly loved through the rough-and-tumble days and nights of their lives. They also had enough arrogance to land them all in the labs.

He'd survived.

Barely.

Most of the others hadn't.

Why this man should strike him so hard was a mystery.

And yet he did.

Michael eyed his host from head to toe for the first time. It should have been enough to cool his ardor. Robert was a gentleman from his perfectly bound hair all the way to his pressed trousers. He wore a shirt as white as Michael's borrowed sheets, and its style was buttoned-up innocence, except where the collar was open to reveal the enticing curve of his throat. That glimpse of smooth, pale skin was offset by a pendant. Crafted of hammered silver, the pendant gleamed with a jet-black stone at its heart. Michael had heard about *Centered* shifters his whole life, but he'd never met one before. The only religion they'd embraced in the city was survival.

He was a shape-shifter, this man who had given Michael his bed.

A Centered shifter, young and fresh and untouched by the outside world. Very unlike the shifters Michael knew. In spite of the blush and the bold way he'd fingered Michael's hair, Robert would be untouchable. Too smooth. Too

perfect. Too calm. Michael was a gang baby. It didn't matter that he'd had to be to survive. He'd grown up on the streets with nothing but his fellow shifters and what they could beg, borrow or steal from others to survive. After that, he'd been a lab rat, never allowed to be human.

Even before he'd lived through hell in the labs, his life had been far from heavenly. Robert Hamilton-Scott was angelic, and from the fresh scent of strawberries to the softness of this luxurious bed, his home was a paradise—a peaceful sanctuary where someone like Michael didn't belong. After being a prisoner for far too long, Michael was hungry for kisses, there was no doubt about it, but an angel's kisses were off-limits.

He regretted the assessment as soon as he'd made it. Yet he sat up as if his lips weren't mourning for the taste they'd just been denied. His movement finally made his host back away. Robert moved quicker than necessary, but slower than Michael would have expected.

He had the grace and polish of a gentleman.

His clothes were immaculate.

He had vulnerable eyes.

But Robert wasn't timid.

Cautious. Careful. Watchful. But not timid.

The idea that his host wasn't really afraid of him shouldn't have made warmth settle low, real low, in the pit of his stomach, but it did. He had some adjusting to do. He needed to settle into himself after being forcefully kept away from his human form. He needed to get a handle on where he would go from here.

Still, he might not know who the new Michael O'Dare would be, but he was afraid he knew who he *wouldn't* be.

In spite of not belonging here, in spite of the hard lessons he'd learned, he was certain even the new Michael was intrigued by his differences with Robert rather than put off by them. He wasn't a man who was going to regret being

sheltered by an achingly alluring man who seemed affected by his touch.

He wasn't that man at all.

Chapter Four

Robert spent a good part of the morning in meditation to restore his equilibrium.

Michael.

If the man had been an angel like his namesake, he'd have been a fallen one. A dark angel with full, enticing lips that begged for kisses even when the man himself said not a word.

Robert had kissed a man once, last fall when a harvest dance in Charlottesville had made him feel too reckless, too free. The contact had been electric, and he'd even gotten a tattoo that night to celebrate his desire rather than regret it. He kept the wings hidden, but they were a constant reminder of his brush with temptation.

That very real kiss paled in comparison to just looking at Michael's lips and having him look back as if he wanted to eat him alive.

Robert held his Centering pendant. The black agate stone had been worn smooth by his thumb over a lifetime of meditation. Because shifters were mildly allergic to silver, the pendant's chain and setting caused a slight tingling sensation wherever it lay. That tingle of warmth was a constant reminder for focus and control. Robert, like all Centered shifters, never called an animal's form without calmly and consciously choosing to do so. Shifting could develop into an addiction—to run, to swim, to fly; it was a rush, but one you should control, not it, you.

The restlessness he witnessed in Michael was, in part, because the other man had been in a shifter gang. Gangsters didn't simply give in to the rush; they used it, embraced it,

gloried in it. Michael simmered with the need to shift, and he was handling it like an alcoholic recovering from a binge.

Through abstinence.

He would fail. Soon Michael would shift without deliberate intention, and it would be painful for him and dangerous for anyone around him. Better to control and enjoy the shift; accept it as the gift it was, but treat it with reverence and respect.

Holding his pendant, Robert struggled to quiet the emotion Michael had raised in him. Passion was dangerous for a shape-shifter.

Michael was dangerous.

Not because he might lead authorities to the sleepy little farm and not because he was as volatile as Robert had been warned he would be. It wasn't even because Michael might leave him facing an unexpected panther in his living room or a dingo in his kitchen.

No, Michael was dangerous because he threatened *Robert's* control. Michael made him want to run, to swim, to fly—especially to fly. Something in Michael, perhaps the year of forced captivity, made Robert want to spread wings and ride the wind and never come back down.

And that was a threat he didn't know how to face.

* * *

Michael found Robert on the front porch surrounded by the tinkling of bells. He was drawn to their chiming, probably because they hinted at intriguing mysteries the other man hid beneath his calm exterior.

There were dozens of wind chimes around Robert, and still, Michael found him hanging one more. He stood on the porch rail, stretching up to hang the copper cylinders that dangled from tiny chains. The wind chimes were like Robert. Controlled but not entirely tamed. He'd thought all

day about the fascination he'd glimpsed in Robert's eyes. Whether the young man was fascinated or not, he ought to leave the sheltered shifter alone.

That kind of sacrifice was easier to contemplate than to follow through on, especially when his body was overcome by sensations it had lived without for a year. He was sensitized to everything from bathwater to a breeze. The chemistry between him and his host seemed to lap in the bathwater, sliding over his skin like a promise. The mutual attraction floated seductively on the breeze, teasing across his face like future kisses he only had to claim.

He watched Robert because he couldn't stay away, even though it was torture to see him and not go far closer to him than he should.

Robert's loose white shirt rode up as he stretched, revealing a muscled expanse of abdomen.

Michael's mouth went dry.

He froze, trying to keep from moving forward, but the breeze continued to tease over his face, bringing with it a hint of Robert's scent. It was woodsy and sweet, but it held undertones of amber and spice. He breathed deeply even as he told himself not to.

This would not end well.

He cursed the chimes for being a siren call.

Because there, barely revealed by the slide of cotton, was a tattoo of wings that dipped and disappeared enticingly beneath the low waistband of Robert's pants.

His scent was more exotic than innocent. The look in his eyes that morning and the chimes he must love hinted at a nature less controlled than his pendant would have people believe. The tattoo, though simple and mostly hidden, did the same.

The glimpse was gone too soon, covered up as Robert pulled back from the chimes with a satisfied sigh. The wind rewarded his efforts, moving the copper pipes and releasing

their inner song in a random, tinkling chorus, at once light and free, but also held tight by their delicate chains.

Michael both mourned the lost sight of that tattoo and was thankful for it. A few more seconds so temptingly displayed on a level with his lips, and he would have...

Of course, covered or not covered, it was there. His peace and control, if he had ever achieved them, were shattered for the day.

And since when had he ever been swayed by the idea of peace or control? Since he'd been abused and imprisoned? Since he'd been locked away from himself for a torturous eternity?

Robert hadn't noticed him yet.

Michael stood at the front door and was invisible for one moment, to his host *and* to himself. His chest was hollow as if he'd somehow lost the soul he'd been born with. Through experiences, a man grew and changed, but he'd been in stasis for a whole year, only to break free and find his human self a stranger.

He knew what he *wanted* to do.

And it wasn't cautious or peaceful but was instead something he would have done without a second of hesitation before his capture. He might not be the same Michael—that man might be forever lost—but he sure as hell wasn't the Michael who would refuse to take a chance, to take a taste, to take whatever an intriguing man like Robert might offer.

Robert was climbing down from the rail, strong and sure and not the least in need of a hand, when without warning, Michael was there.

Not touching him.

Michael didn't need to actually touch him. For a man like Michael, *close was enough*.

Robert could practically feel Michael's hands, though he kept them down by his sides. He could imagine the press of Michael's body, though it was several inches away from his.

Inches.

Robert settled his feet firmly on the porch and gazed up at the shifter who had gone from being a presence that had throbbed in his consciousness all day to a man whose body heat he could feel teasing from his neck to his knees.

Michael no longer seemed tortured or distrustful. He didn't look like a man who had recently escaped from a year of captivity. He looked powerful, dangerous—*hungry*.

The sun had begun to set, and the light that bathed them matched Michael's hair. Robert glanced at its fall, no longer resting, dormant, against a pillow. It curled around Michael's face and shoulders in a vibrant mass of reds and golds. It still begged to be touched, *but with both hands buried deep and pulling him closer*.

Robert took a deep breath.

Michael no longer smelled of rain. He had bathed in *Robert's* bathroom, in *his* tub, and Michael's skin now held a hint of soap, crisp and clean.

The sun placed a golden spotlight on Michael's face. Robert tilted his chin to soak up the glow, to note the way the light played off the masculine angles of the taller shifter's chin and jaw and the hollows of his cheeks. Michael was lean and looked like he'd always been, but the leanness of his face was offset by the fullness of his lips and the gleam in his eyes, by the lush lashes framing those eyes and the hair caressing the edges of his face.

He was hard and soft. Dangerous, but hungry, *achingly hungry*, as well.

Robert willed his hands to match Michael's even though he badly wanted to brave Michael's danger to touch his softness. So much so that his fingers twitched.

Michael had come forward to be near him but waited as if he were in animal form, trying to gauge whether Robert was a friend or foe...or prey.

Michael needed to touch and be touched.

He could see Michael's desire in his tense body and in the way his gaze tracked over Robert's face, settling on his lips. Heat built there, on his mouth, as if Michael's golden gaze brought warmth with it, as if he didn't have to even lean down to press his lips to Robert's for him to feel the kiss that had yet to be.

Robert wanted to speak. He needed to break the moment before it claimed him. He was afraid if he didn't, the next would be even more potent, even harder to resist, because as Michael's gaze tracked from Robert's lips back to his eyes, passion darkened it from golden to bronze. Michael had seen something in the way Robert moistened his lips, something in the way his breath caught as Michael edged closer still.

Robert didn't speak, but he did ease away, automatically pressing against the porch rail as the other man advanced.

The shift he resisted was in Michael's glowing eyes. Flight. Soaring. He could no longer feel his Centering pendant, because as he responded to that look and the sensual man who wore it, his body was awash in tingles that rivaled the silver's effect.

Robert was surprised his retreat caused the tall shifter to halt his advance. It was subtle restraint, considering how close his body was to Robert's, but restraint nonetheless.

"I should have thanked you for everything—the pancakes, the bed, soap..." The simple words were uttered in a voice with low tones that went straight to Robert's knees, then radiated straight up to his cock.

Michael didn't look grateful.

He looked like he wanted and needed so much more.

He was focused on Robert to the exclusion of the world around them. His lips were soft and open. And his cheeks were flushed as if heated by thoughts that would rock Robert's world if Michael were to share them.

"You're welcome," Robert replied, all too aware he sounded like he'd just run an uphill marathon as a dormouse, with hounds on his heels.

"There was a time when I took whatever I wanted and never bothered with thank-yous," Michael confessed. Robert almost jumped as Michael raised his hand, but he managed to hold still, very still, when it moved past his face to tap the wind chime he'd just hung. Its cheerful music tinged in response to that slight touch, and something in Robert tinged as well in response to the words "take" and "want."

His gaze was drawn back to Michael's hair, and he fisted his fingers to keep them in check.

Pure yearning arched through him.

"Times change," Robert replied, and his cheeks warmed, because he'd sounded almost regretful.

Did he really want an unreformed shifter gangster in his house? A man who wouldn't respect his retreat?

"That's what I thought...until today."

Michael went to his knees so suddenly that Robert had no time to react. One second, Michael was warm and tall beside him, and the next, Michael had pressed his face to Robert's stomach, his hands having pulled the shirt up and aside to tease his lips across the exposed skin.

Robert couldn't draw back in surprise. He was trapped between Michael's face and the porch rail behind his hips. He gasped and raised his hands to hold on to the back of Michael's head. The move threaded his fingers deep into the silky waves he'd longed to touch, and the instant that silken slide claimed him, he didn't want to pull away. Retreat was the last thing on his mind.

Michael moved his mouth over Robert's skin, kissing and caressing parts of him usually left hidden and alone. Michael slid his tongue out to tease moisture over Robert's abs, and Robert's cock responded, growing harder and threatening to peek over the waistband where Michael's tongue explored so close, but not close enough.

Robert allowed the tasting.

He could have called his grizzly to swat Michael across the porch like a hunter on the wrong trail at the wrong time.

He didn't.

Instead he pulled Michael closer. Any shock or reserve that might have helped him resist instantly dissipated once his hands were burrowed in that glorious shifter hair. When locks of it slid to tickle and tease against his skin, Robert burned even hotter. Michael's lips were a sinful pleasure. His hair was impossible to resist.

Robert didn't want to be Centered.

He didn't want Michael to be tamed.

He wanted to fly with Michael, and for the first time, he thought it might be possible without wings, without leaving the ground at all.

He'd closed his eyes with the first sensation of lips on his skin. Now he opened them to see a powerful shifter on his knees before him. His dick pulsed in response to the visual. He ached and grew damp when Michael caught him watching. Dark was coming. The sun had set. Crickets and frogs began their rhythmic songs, but Robert could still see Michael's eyes, and the wicked light in them had nothing to do with the setting sun after all.

When Michael flicked his tongue out to tease across Robert's secret tattoo, the red swollen head of Robert's cock finally grew beyond the confines of his boxers. It peeked out, glistening with precome.

With no warning, moist heat from Michael's tongue teased closer to his penis, but as he held great handfuls of

his hair, it was Michael's eyes that truly teased. *Come fly with me*, they said. And Robert wanted to say, *Yes, oh, definitely, yes!* but he could only gasp for air when Michael's tongue lapped over the exposed head of his cock, licking it clean and drawing it into a kiss from his soft, open lips.

Robert held on tighter when Michael cupped his ass and pulled him closer. But still he teased with gentle laps of his tongue and an ever-so-slight suction that only made Robert's knees tremble as he imagined and craved what the depths of Michael's silken mouth would feel like to fuck and plunder with the whole length of his swollen dick.

Robert breathed out, "Michael?" and it was an indefinite question, but a question all the same.

The quavering need in his voice was the only spur the wild stallion in Michael required. He ripped Robert's trousers down and out of the way. Cool air flowed over his shaft and balls only for an instant before he was claimed by Michael's mouth, deep throated so that every inch of his pulsing cock was wrapped in moist velvet.

No longer teasing, the other man gave him all the suction he could have desired, and in so doing, gave Robert permission to lose control. Without thinking, Robert jerked his hips, taking what Michael offered, fucking his hungry mouth as the pressure in his balls and dick mounted to the point of no return.

"Michael," he said again, and this time it wasn't a question. He only wanted to speak the name, to revel in this moment and his caresses even though he shouldn't—*wouldn't* if he were as in control as he ought to be.

And his fierce lover responded by gripping his bare ass, parting his cheeks with insistent fingers to find and tease his virgin hole. That new and thrilling sensation of fullness sent Robert over the edge. His dick pulsed, and an exhilarating

release of semen spurted from its tip to flood the back of Michael's throat.

He worried for only a second before Michael moaned and swallowed as if enjoying the flavor of his hot come.

Decadent bliss caused his limbs to weaken, and he had to rest his weight against Michael or fall. The sensation of his softening cock being worked by Michael's tongue was almost overwhelming in its tenderness.

Only then did Michael stand. He didn't step back, didn't pull away. He simply stood, and the movement slid his body against Robert's inch by inch until Michael was upright once more.

Robert dropped his hands to Michael's shoulders, then to his chest. The muscles beneath his fingers distracted him from the loss of Michael's silky hair. He looked from his splayed hands to Michael's face. Michael's lips were full and swollen, and the sight of them made Robert expectantly moisten his own.

But Michael didn't kiss him.

He did urge Robert up to prop his back against the porch rail. He did move in between Robert's parted legs and tilt his body, bringing surprisingly hot parts of him in contact with the tingling hole he had already teased with his fingers.

Robert again held on as Michael slid his hands up his sides until they reached his shoulders and then his neck. Then he moved his left hand to Robert's nape to toy with his bound hair.

"I've had faulty instincts in the past. Instincts that got me in trouble," Michael said and moved his fingers to delve into Robert's hair for the bit of leather that held it in place, even as their intimate position let him feel that Michael was no less excited than he'd been seconds before. His tone was still casual, though his closeness made his words an intimate whisper. The innocent act he performed didn't seem casual,

not casual at all. Robert's entire self loosened as his hair was loosened.

"If I let them change that, *change me*, then there's very little reason for me to have escaped in the first place."

Robert watched, mesmerized, as his hair came down. Michael spread his fingers and let it go like a person who had caught a butterfly or a bird only to let it fly free. The unbound weight fell over his shoulders and chest and down his back.

Robert was still afraid to fly even though the urge was there, so there.

"I've never taken anyone against their will, Robert, and I won't start now just because I need to prove I'm a man again, to proclaim that I'm alive and myself. But I have taken *and given*—" Michael leaned in, bringing his mouth very close. So close, his next words were whispered on Robert's lips, "—great pleasure in the past. I'd like to reclaim that part of who I was, who I am, with you."

Robert wasn't Centered.

He hadn't been for long moments.

With those words, with that offer, Michael made him wonder if he would ever be Centered again. He made Robert realize something was missing.

It wasn't enough to embrace tradition and heritage and wrap himself up in it as he would a comfortable quilt. Without passion, without fervor, what was the point of it all?

Robert didn't know.

But he did know there would be no turning back from Michael's kiss.

The other man was so close. His lips only millimeters away. Robert blinked in a lazy rhythm as time seemed to hold still, and each time he lifted his lids, the temptation of Michael's lips was a sensual surprise he faced all over again.

One kiss.

Michael must know he was undecided, still uncertain about risking the hold he had on the shift and his emotions. He had seen the Centering pendant. It wasn't hidden.

Why else would Michael give him this pause?

Why would he offer to give only if Robert would take, and take only what Robert would give?

"I want to taste you," Robert said. Between his legs and beneath his hands, Michael's muscles tensed. "But I can't," he continued desperately, before Michael could move and shatter whatever control Robert still possessed.

A man didn't lead a Centered life for twenty-three years only to leave it in a heated moment with no worries and no regrets.

"Can't or won't?" Michael responded, looking from Robert's lips to the pendant against his neck.

"Shouldn't," Robert replied, and by the way Michael lifted his gaze to meet his eyes, he could tell he'd surprised him with what amounted to a confession. Robert regretted the honesty when Michael's eyelids drooped and his tempting lips curved into a wicked smile.

"Being your forbidden fruit is going to be hot, Robert. I'm not sure how long I can survive it."

He stood there in Robert's arms, pressed so closely, held with thighs as well as hands, and Robert was in trouble, because some secret part of himself flared to life with Michael's teasing words.

Robert had admitted he wanted his kiss. Michael had said he liked it—his desire, his hunger, even his hesitation. Fallen angel? Michael was devilish, for sure. *And Robert liked it*—the thrill of power he got from resisting him and the opposite thrill, the one that said he might not be able to resist for long.

"I have to relearn how to walk and talk and live like a man again, but if you work through your reservations, *when*

you work through them, I hope I'm here. I really hope I am."

Michael was several feet away before Robert realized he intended to take no for an answer. His lips, his hair, his whole body...too far away. Michael backed up, watching as Robert slid down from the rail and placed a hand on his stomach, which still tingled with warmth from the kisses his lips longed for.

"I'm here," Michael said again.

Robert didn't need the reminder. His body sang in response to Michael's presence like the singing wind chimes above and around him responded to the breeze.

Chapter Five

After a restless night, Robert rose at dawn. He had tossed and turned instead of sleeping. Thinking of Michael's hair on his pillow. His stomach had been hot from Michael's kisses, and his cock hotter. All night long, Michael had been only a short hallway away.

"Here," he'd said. *"I'm here."*

That truth had pulsed in Robert all through the night.

As had his need to shift and escape.

The air was crisp when he stepped onto the balcony outside his bedroom window. Michael had moved to the guest bedroom even though its bed was too small for him. A considerate move, but one that left Robert to sleep in the bed Michael had somehow managed to make less comfortable simply by having been in it the night before.

The air reminded him autumn was on its way. The changing seasons were important to shifters because hibernating animals couldn't be "called." Shifters didn't morph their bodies. Their human form simply dematerialized, while their consciousness entered the body of the animal they chose to call.

He shivered as his bare feet hit dew-dampened wood. Chilled inside and out, he braced himself. After the shift, when his body returned, his core temperature would plummet. No one knew why. Shape-shifting was a mysterious, sacred act that connected shifters to every creature with a beating heart on the planet. Scientists might have created the original shape-shifters in a laboratory, but Creation herself had taken over. Only the divine could explain what shape-shifters were capable of doing, because their abilities went far deeper than science.

Shape-shifting *was* sacred. But it could also be addictive.

Robert walked to the edge of the balcony and gazed out over the hills and trees he intended to soar above in moments.

He needed to spread his wings and fly. He needed the fresh morning wind rushing over his feathers. Or maybe he just needed to escape from his aching body for a little while.

While he flew, his human body would cease to be, which might be why he leaped up and into the air, effortlessly assuming his bird form and leaving his traitorous one behind in icy nothingness where it would no longer burn.

* * *

He'd expected a dove, pale and perfect. When Robert landed on the balcony where he waited, Michael was amazed. Robert had called a sleek peregrine falcon, no less perfect, but surprisingly fierce and quick.

His heart leaped in response to Robert's revealing choice. He'd guessed the other man wasn't timid, that hidden passion simmered beneath Robert's rigid control, but as mist rose from the fields beyond and the sun began to shine, Robert embraced his power in a decisive way Michael wouldn't have imagined.

The falcon flicked its wings out in a final preening stretch and then was gone, and in its place stood Robert, his beautiful body back where it belonged.

Temptingly near Michael's. A few steps and he could take Robert in his arms.

He had told himself he was watching over the younger shifter. His time in captivity had taught him to fear and respect the shift more than he ever had before. He'd sighed in relief when Robert's falcon disappeared and his body reformed, only to catch his breath a second later.

Clothes didn't shift with the shifter. Robert stood nude before him, and again Michael was surprised.

Because Robert noticed him and didn't turn away.

Because he walked toward him, fierce and quick, as if he had kept a portion of the falcon's spirit within his human heart.

Robert came into his arms, and Michael gladly wrapped them around him. Robert was shivering, his skin wet with dew. The chill of the shift transferred to Michael's fingers, and they went numb, but he ignored the discomfort. Instead he savored the look and feel of the other man. Robert's hair was unbound, a wavy mass of dampened curls.

Dark blond curls streaked with white, silver and gold.

He'd known the brown was a disguise, but he hadn't imagined what Robert's natural color would be.

Michael took Robert's face in his hands, and it was as if he saw him for the first time. His eyes glittered with all he had seen during his flight, his chest rose and fell with exertion, and goose bumps kissed his bare skin, bringing it to life beneath Michael's touch. This was the real Robert, no hair dye or modest clothes or Centering pendant to hide him from Michael or the world.

"I was waiting for you," Michael confessed, smoothing Robert's hair back from his face.

"I know," Robert responded. "It's why I flew...and why I came back."

Robert tilted his face up as he spoke, and Michael leaned over him as if to breathe in the words as they were spoken. Robert's gaze was on his lips, and Michael's heart stuttered again because it wasn't a dove's furtive glance, but a falcon's predatory one.

Since he'd reclaimed his human body, he'd never inhabited it so completely. The sensation of Robert's warming skin pressed to his from legs to pelvis to chest grounded him, rooted him, made him whole once more, not

the hollowed shell the scientists had left him. But it was the look in Robert's eyes that brought forth Michael's own memories of circling and diving and flying.

This time he didn't give any warning, didn't ask for permission or wait for it. He simply leaned in and took what he could no longer resist.

* * *

Robert had come back to his human form with the memory of his heart pounding and the wind in his wings. Crossing the space separating him from Michael and accepting—no, *taking* his embrace had been as easy as riding a surging updraft. His Centering pendant was on the vanity in his room. Whether it was on or off didn't matter. A whole quarry of agate stones couldn't have kept his lips from Michael's.

And Michael seemed more than ready. He smoothed his mouth over Robert's as if he had fantasized about this moment long enough to plan and measure each movement so that it would be perfect, as if he savored each sigh of their mingled breaths, as if each millisecond of contact mattered and should be lingered over and focused on and reveled in.

And it was revelry.

For Robert, as well.

Robert pressed close and tilted his chin for better access. He softened and opened his lips, finding the slide of Michael's to be intoxicating. *More so than flying.*

The morning flight had lowered his inhibitions. The increasing hint of Michael's flicking tongue against his lips, there and again, until he finally slipped it between them to glide against Robert's tongue—that seductive stroking undid any lingering fears.

Hunger. Need. Urgency.

They were new feelings, but they didn't feel wrong. The very rightness of them rose up to heighten his senses and flood away his reserve.

He had been Centered his entire life. During the kiss, he became simply Robert, a man in need of Michael's passion, his touch, his hunger, and he found an echoing hunger in himself, one he'd never known he possessed.

He pressed his cock against the springy hair on Michael's thighs, and the answering heat and hardness of Michael's dick slid against his stomach.

Robert was free *and* caught, but when he pulled back to look at Michael's face, he saw Michael was caught as well, and that made this impetuous embrace seem safer, even if lying with an un-Centered shifter was the most dangerous thing he'd ever done.

Michael supported him, cupping his ass and holding him close, but the quick breaths coming from his parted lips told Robert that *he* needed support; Michael needed him.

Michael dipped to take his kiss again, and Robert moaned against his lips, eagerly meeting the thrusts of his tongue as they learned the taste and feel of each other. Robert had never been naked in a man's arms, but he was suddenly so sure, so not afraid.

As if sensing Robert's certainty, Michael pulled him inside to the bed then and held him close. He placed him carefully on the soft quilts, only following with the full weight of his body when Robert was settled and ready.

Michael was warmer than he was, because Robert's body was still recovering, and Michael used his warmth as if he knew Robert needed it. He rubbed his hands along Robert's arms and pressed his body closer, so they were chest to chest. He moved his legs over Robert's until Robert's thighs warmed, and his breath caught because he craved the warmest part of Michael still hidden by the sleep shorts he wore.

Could Robert take what he wanted and remain true to who he had always been, or was he preparing to lose himself in this heated moment?

Again, Michael responded to Robert's hesitation, gentling the pressure until his hands slid over skin with only a whisper of sensation.

"I want to warm you and be warmed by you," Michael said, and Robert looked from his muscled form up to his face. Michael wasn't warm, not deep down where it counted. In Michael's heart, he still carried the remembered chill from his forced, prolonged shifts, still carried the cold fear the labs had left behind.

Michael was a devilish gangster, all sexy confidence and seductive smiles, but he was also hurt and hungry and cold.

Robert reached for him, running his hands up and over his back and into his soft hair. He held Michael, looking into his eyes, and kissed him again, but this time he playfully nipped and nibbled and *seduced* his pain away. He slid his tongue across Michael's lips, teasing and tempting and taking him away from the cold memories of the past into the very heated present.

Robert tried to warm him.

And he responded.

Their tongues danced. Their bodies slid and rocked together, and Robert was able to reach down and pull aside the bit of cloth covering Michael's dick. He then pushed Michael's shorts down, and the other man eased back to let him, but only for a moment before he was back closer than before.

The heat and size of Michael's cock startled Robert, but the urge to wipe the remembered cold from Michael's eyes made him braver and bolder than he would have been otherwise. Robert spread his legs and wrapped them around Michael's waist. He gasped when the position brought the wet tip of Michael's erection against his ass.

Michael moved his hips, and Robert breathed in again. Michael pulled back from the kiss in response, and the chill in his golden eyes began to fade. The gold deepened and darkened because the passionate connection between their bodies left no room for the ugly past to intrude. As Michael guided his cock to slide against Robert's puckered hole, he watched to gauge Robert's reaction. Robert thrilled from that stimulation, a nervous throb that went straight to his hard dick and only increased when Michael reached for his discarded shorts and retrieved a small bottle of lubricant.

Michael kept his intense gaze on Robert's as he popped the top of the lube and drizzled it over his cock and Robert's balls. The liquid trickled down over Robert's ass, teasing and stimulating even before Michael followed the trail with his gentle fingers. This time when he fingered Robert, the lubricant allowed a more thorough claiming.

Robert moaned and fell back, spreading his legs farther apart as Michael readied him for bigger *and better* things. Michael pressed close, trapping Robert's aching dick between their stomachs, and that pressure coupled with the claiming of his ass almost made him come.

"I've never touched anyone like you." Michael leaned down to whisper against his lips. "You're sweet and innocent, but you make me burn hotter than the most experienced lover."

"I need you. I'm so cold," Robert begged.

And Michael eagerly obliged, replacing the slide of his fingers with the heat of his dick.

The slick coating made up for his size and Robert's virginity. Michael seemed to know just how to rock and move to help his swollen cock gain entry. He teased along Robert's ass, *then into it*, only pausing when he had to, easing back, then forward, then back again. Robert tensed, but as Michael took the time to rock in and out, in and out, sliding and teasing, he relaxed and the pleasure claimed

him. So full, so taken. Michael reached for Robert's dick with his other hand, and the pleasure increased a hundredfold.

"Yes, oh man, yes," he moaned, and Michael laughed, a sound so wild and wicked that it caused Robert to jerk and release a shot of precome all over Michael's fingers.

With that evidence of Robert's enjoyment, Michael finally went the extra inches necessary to claim his ass. Robert was ready, and the warmth and fullness were better than he'd imagined they could be.

And then, Robert rocked.

He moved, thrusting his hips up as Michael gripped his dick in an insistent fist, working it relentlessly toward climax. The fall of Michael's hair, the sweat on his forehead and his heavy-lidded golden gaze as he moved his hips in pursuit of their mutual pleasure—those visuals were all it took to send great jets of come exploding from the head of Robert's cock. Then Michael's body tensed, and the hot flood of his release filled Robert with the heat he so desperately craved.

And Robert was Centered in a different way than he had been. Not without passion, but with Michael's passion—shared. The passion became a part of him, and he took it without losing himself. Yet he wasn't the same. He was subtly more, because he had braved this moment, this passion, with Michael.

Chapter Six

Michael was still between Robert's thighs when he leaned to reach for the pendant resting beside the bed, and Robert shivered when Michael placed it against the skin of his neck. Not because he didn't welcome it, but because there was something even more intimate about the gesture than what they had just shared.

"What does this do for you, Robert?"

He tensed, but only for a moment. There was curiosity in Michael's eyes, not a challenge. The other man honestly wanted to know.

"The same thing this farm does—reminds me of things that need to be remembered. The agate stone is a focus for our energy. The silver is a constant reminder."

"Does it keep you from shifting?"

The question wasn't innocent. Michael had been forced, controlled, used. But shifters had to shift or they would go insane like a hermit in a forgotten mountain cave, too long separated from the world they'd left behind.

"No. It just reminds me not to abuse the ability, to think before I shift."

"You love to fly."

"I do." Heat flooded Robert's cheeks, because he loved their intimacy more than he loved flying now, and he was afraid not even a Centering pendant could prevent it from becoming addictive. Michael noticed the blush *and seemed to like it*, as his color deepened, as well. Not with embarrassment, but with heat. He might seek to control his shifting abilities, might even fear them after what he'd been through, but he wouldn't ever lose a hint of gangster that

said he was more about sensuality than caution. *Robert* liked *that* about him.

“So why do you fight it?”

“I don’t fight it. I harness it. I control it so it doesn’t control me.”

“And you learned this from...?”

“My family has been Centered since my grandmother escaped the labs. She hid here at Hamilton Croft, and then my human grandfather, who owned this farm, asked her to stay as his wife.”

Robert’s grandmother had often had a faraway look in her eyes. She kept a serene expression on her face, but her eyes would often give away whether she was thinking of Josiah Hamilton-Scott and the love they’d found together, or older, much more painful memories.

“So it’s a tradition.”

“Yes.”

“And the resistance fighters who helped me escape from the lab? What’s their story?”

“Some of them are shape-shifters. Some aren’t. All of them are fed up with the government ransacking homes and tearing up communities looking for their friends and neighbors who just happen to be...different.”

“You say ‘them’ as if you aren’t a part of this fight,” Michael pointed out.

“We help. I help. But Centered shifters usually try to stay away from trouble.”

“Until it comes knocking on your front door,” Michael teased, but then his smile faded and he grew serious. “It’s not safe to stay here.”

Did Michael mean “here” as in “in his arms”? No. Michael meant at the farm.

“I have to stay. Last fall my mother left to take my grandmother west, but she was only going to find a safe place for her there and come back as soon as she could.”

Only a year ago, the idea of soldiers invading the sleepy community was unthinkable. Taking his grandmother west had been an excess of caution due to her age and her fear of going back to the labs. He and his mother had both thought the government's interest in shifters would ease, not increase. Trying to control and contain a race of beings who could walk among you undetected was a challenge, especially in a country like America, where freedom was more a lifestyle than a concept. The difficulty of capturing and trying to control shape-shifters wasn't stopping the government from trying. They continued to tighten their fingers even as more shifters slipped through their grasp.

Robert should be making his way west to the territories that were known to be sympathetic to shifters.

Should, but couldn't.

Hamilton Croft had been his family's haven for years. There were times when it seemed this comfy homestead represented all he had left.

"Last fall?" Michael asked, raising one eyebrow as if he was surprised Robert had stayed for so long.

"I can't abandon the farm."

"It's tradition," Michael repeated, as though the concept was as foreign to him as spaceflight would be to a Neanderthal. Michael might never understand his devotion to the land and his historic family home.

"Yes."

Of course he'd thought about leaving, many times, but pain sliced through him when Michael spoke his doubts aloud with such finality and bluntness.

He had been mourning the loss of Hamilton Croft for months. Soldiers had sacked Charlottesville just last week to flush out any shape-shifters or those aiding them. Being here was dangerous. But knowing that and accepting it were worlds apart. He hadn't heard from his mother in so long.

Leaving his home would feel as if he were giving her up for lost.

Robert pulled away from Michael's warm body and wrapped himself in the quilt he remembered from his childhood. Its worn softness had been patched and repaired often and well, so it was the same usable work of art it had always been. Robert was grateful for Michael's silence and for the comforting hand Michael placed on his back. Michael had lived a harsh life, yet he offered a grieving Robert warmth. He had never had a home, but he sympathized with Robert's dilemma.

* * *

The soldiers came that afternoon after lunch while Robert was washing dishes. He had sent Michael to check on one of the goats that was preparing to give birth at any time. Robert wanted to defuse the tension caused by the looming decision. To stay or to leave. He couldn't look at Michael without wondering how his new lover fit into his future.

O'Dare was so not a farmer.

He had walked toward the barn and the fenced field beyond as if he should have had an electric guitar in his hand instead of a bucket full of grain. Michael had a swagger that should have taken him to a stage and not a lopsided old farm building.

Robert forgot the bowl in his hands for long moments; then he got grumpy for having been so easily distracted by Michael's sexy walk, by the smooth flow of muscles beneath his clothes, by the way his hair shone in the sun.

Rock star?

Fallen angel?

Devil?

His.

Hard to accept, but “his” rang truer than the rest.

Banging on the front door interrupted him, and when he opened it, he was glad Michael had made it inside the barn. He was a shifter through and through, from his hair to his swagger, and the men on the front porch would have known it in an instant.

Robert was also glad the shadowed porch and screen door gave him some time to school his features. And that he’d tied his hair back that morning. He hadn’t been able to force himself to color it. After every shift, he faithfully used the dye to mask his true colors, but not this time. Hopefully bound it wouldn’t give him away.

He had to pray that was enough.

“Robert Hamilton-Scott? Put your hands on your head and come forward.” The lead soldier spoke the order as if he’d done so a million times before. Unfortunately, it seemed his pleasure in speaking it only increased each time.

Robert’s hands were already there. Searches had become so commonplace, every citizen knew the drill. He pushed the screen door open with his hip and walked out into the loose circle of eight men. Even if he hadn’t been a fugitive shape-shifter, he would have been afraid. The men didn’t look like they were on a disciplined mission. They were like pirates preparing to pillage. He wished he could call his mountain lion to startle the confident looks right off their faces, but they carried Tasers. Such a move would be futile.

Instead he tried to act like he didn’t notice the looks.

“The local people say you help with the sick, sell produce... Why do you stay way out here by yourself?”

Several of the soldiers’ smirks morphed into ugly grins, and the leader questioned Robert’s crotch, not his face.

He’d heard stories about soldiers taking advantage of “fringe benefits.” He might have difficult choices before the afternoon was over. Fight off these men as an unwilling

fuck and lose, or shift, save his virtue and spend the rest of his days in captivity.

And what of Michael?

His involvement in either scenario would be disastrous.

"There's been a Hamilton-Scott on this farm for over a hundred years," he answered with a shrug of one shoulder and a lifted chin.

He'd never called forth an elephant, but if he called a big animal, he might at least trample a few soldiers before they stopped him.

"Aren't you afraid of shape-shifters?" another soldier asked, looking more nervous than lustful. He wore a big silver cross around his neck. As if that would protect his vulnerable throat from savage claws.

"I've never seen one," Robert lied. "Has someone around here reported seeing one?"

"No reports. Of anything," the leader said, eyes narrowed. "Charlottesville and the surrounding areas are like one huge blank *shout* on our charts."

How do you appear casual and innocent and like a human man facing threatening soldiers all at the same time? Robert tried, but he was afraid he looked like a tiger waiting to happen.

"It's quiet around here," Robert said. "Always has been."

"Too quiet," the superstitious soldier stuttered, wrapping his hand around his cross as he glanced furtively around.

The fresh country air teased and tantalized Michael's nose as he walked toward the barn. He breathed deeply, cataloging the scents he recognized, acknowledging the mysteries of those he didn't.

There was no asphalt, no exhaust fumes.

But best of all, there was no hint of the disinfectant-tainted air he'd been forced to breathe in the lab.

Even when he stepped into the barn, he caught only the faintest whiff of livestock. He was overwhelmed by the scents of fresh hay and cedar shavings. Robert kept the outbuildings as immaculate as he kept his home...and himself.

Hamilton Croft and its master seemed too perfect, too good to be true. Michael paused and closed his eyes against memories that weren't nearly as pleasant.

The night before had been unadulterated decadence, unmarred by anything as mundane as conscience or morality. Michael rose from a mattress he had shared with six—no, another head protruded from under a tattered blanket—seven other shape shifters. He stood and reached for a pair of discarded jeans. They were loose when he fastened them, no doubt belonging to one of the other critters in the tangle of naked limbs on the floor, where others had spilled when the bedding could hold no more.

He kept them on anyway and headed for the door of the apartment.

He needed fresh air, to be alone before the building was crawling with hungover shifters trying to get their bearings.

Michael climbed up the stairs to the roof, ignoring the goose bumps that rose on his bare chest. He traded the odors of sex, alcohol and sweat for the morning air of Charlotte. Regular people were already hustling and bustling. He breathed in the smell of exhaust as the movement of the city hummed all around him.

He should have been peaceful, satiated from a wild night filled with hot pussy and ass, sweet cocks and willing lips. His body was stiff and sore, but the frenzy with which he'd embraced the night hadn't brought him peace—only temporary oblivion. For a minute, he allowed himself to wonder what it would have been like to wake up beside one special lover at the sound of an alarm. He sat on the ledge

of the roof. Down on the street below, cars flowed by like a mechanical stream. Michael imagined what it would have been like to get into one of them and drive to a nine to five.

His imaginings were interrupted by a young woman he vaguely remembered from the night before. She wore nothing but a tiny slip of silk panties that barely covered her neatly trimmed bush. In contrast, the wild mane of her multihued black hair hung down over her breasts until those orbs played peek a boo with his sleepy eyes as she walked forward.

He remembered why her hair was so tousled. They had used it to hold her, and she had liked it. She'd come so hard around his dick, he'd thought she would squeeze it off.

In an almost detached way, his cock hardened when she dropped down on all fours to crawl the remaining distance between them. So sub, so sweet. It was the way of the gang for younger, weaker members to be submissive to the older, stronger ones. The woman couldn't be older than nineteen or twenty. At nineteen, Michael had done his share of crawling too.

Still, when she unfastened his loose jeans to free him and take him in her mouth, the pleasure was diminished somehow. Not because his shaft was tender from the night before. Not because she wasn't enthusiastically worshipping his cock with lips and teeth and tongue.

Why?

Michael tilted his chin so he could look up at the blue sky. A jet plane flew above his head, and he tracked it with his gaze as his balls tightened and pleasure built. There was an echoing pressure in his chest, a tightness that no sub on his or her knees could ease. He wanted to be in that plane going anywhere that wasn't here. Not with wings, but in a seat with a seat belt and a miniature cocktail.

Her practiced mouth overcame his distraction, and he started to come, but he didn't look down at the woman

whose name he couldn't even remember. He stared up at the clouds and dreamed of flying away.

Ema.

Her name had been Ema. He'd protected her as long as he could during the raid, killing several soldiers before he was Tased. She'd died in the labs like so many before and since. Since the First Generation shape-shifters had escaped, unrestricted mating and breeding had resulted in a population of shape-shifters no one had been able to contain. But that didn't stop the government from trying. Always trying. Making it almost impossible for shifters to make a "normal" life for themselves.

Michael had cracked the hard plastic bucket with his grip. He loosened it too late. Grain fell on the ground, and several goats crowded in to hungrily lap it up.

He hadn't been able to save Ema or any of his fellow gangsters. Was he really prepared to care about Robert? The gang had been the only family he'd ever known, and he'd lost them all.

Enjoying hot sex was one thing, but Robert was far removed from Michael's former decadent life, where sex was used to establish a hierarchy, to pay for favors or to escape the ugliness of living on the fringes of society.

With Robert, sex meant something more—a promise and a sharing of trust. Was Michael ready to risk that kind of connection?

A change in the atmosphere pulled him out of his thoughts. The goats shied away as he dropped the bucket and tilted his nose into the gentle breeze.

Guns.

Unwashed bodies.

Tension.

Robert was no longer alone, and the day was no longer peaceful.

Always.

Michael turned toward his lover, though he couldn't see through the barn that stood between him and the farmhouse. In that instant he made his decision.

* * *

Michael came around the corner of the house and leaped onto the porch.

He was a Newfoundland, a huge black dog just like the ones bred at the Briar Ridge Kennels nearby back before animal breeding was outlawed. The government had wanted complete control of any possible hybrids, and even innocent breeding was suspect. Robert was amazed at Michael's intelligence and his control. He could have called a polar bear, but he hadn't. The kennel had been abandoned and the dogs freed years ago. There were so many Newfies and their mixed offspring in the Charlottesville area, the soldiers must have seen hundreds in the past few weeks.

The one Michael had called padded toward them with its head down and its chest rumbling.

"Hey," the leader protested when the dog pushed by him to get to Robert's side.

Newfoundlands were classified as a giant breed, and they had been known to hit two hundred pounds. Though even-tempered and faithful, they could also be excellent guard dogs, determined to protect their owners from harm. Michael appeared part Great Dane and part Rottweiler, as well, big and ready to fight.

"Charlie would keep them away, wouldn't you, boy?" Robert dropped to one knee and ruffled the Newfie's fur.

Michael had calmly and carefully shifted...for him. He must have dreaded abandoning his human body again, but he had done it and come to be by Robert's side.

“We’re going to search your property. Keep the dog under control or we’ll Tase him,” the leader said. He took the weapon from his belt as if the big dog made him nervous.

He gave his orders, and the other soldiers obeyed, even though one or two mumbled like they’d like to protest louder because their “fun” had been interrupted. Dark glances shot his way.

After the search, what then?

Robert could feel the tenseness in the dog’s muscles beneath its fur. Would Michael risk being captured again to try to save him?

He already knew the answer.

Michael was by his side, when he could have quietly flown away.

The gangster had lived a rough life.

He had fought often and well if his survival was any indication.

Shifter gangsters didn’t live to see their twenty-fifth birthdays, much less their thirtieth. They were known for being tough, not heroic. Beneath his fingers, the sturdy dog was warm and solid, and hope rose up to calm his nerves.

He had thought of Michael as a fallen angel; now he wasn’t so sure.

He was certain of one thing.

He wouldn’t let Michael go back to the labs. Not for him. Not ever.

Robert had no choice. He led two soldiers, the leader and a man who looked as if he’d joined up only for those fringe benefits, into the farmhouse. The leader seemed to ignore him, but the other one didn’t. His bloodshot brown eyes followed Robert’s ass wherever he moved. He didn’t even attempt to disguise the lust that burned in them. The soldiers tracked mud onto the polished wood floor as they began their search. The leader headed for the kitchen. The

lascivious one noticed Robert looking at the mud and paused long enough to wipe his feet...on the Persian rug a Scott cousin had brought back home from Europe after World War II.

Robert didn't have time for anger.

He gripped the scruff of the Newfie's neck.

Their lunch dishes were on the drain board.

Two bowls.

Two spoons.

Two glasses.

By now, the leader was in the kitchen.

Time seemed to slow as he and Michael came around the corner to find him at the sink.

He turned, Taser raised, but Michael didn't wait for him to speak. He launched his massive body, showing more agility than the Newfie should have possessed as he curved his back in midair to dodge the electrode projectiles. Before the leader could shout, he was down with his throat threatened by the Newfie's teeth.

Robert rejected the forms of mountain lion, tiger and elephant as he shifted, opting for surprise over brute force. His lynx took him zipping to the upstairs bedroom to find the leering soldier before he could sound the alarm.

The soldier upstairs was very foolish indeed if he was searching for shape-shifters but was still surprised when Robert came at him from under the bed as a boa, having slipped under, unseen, as the small wildcat, only to call the enormous snake once he was hidden.

He took great pleasure in coiling around the lusty soldier's face and throat to prevent his shouts, but he held just long enough to cause the man to pass out before he loosened his coils.

Robert was going to call his body back, when he heard gunfire outside.

* * *

He went tiger after all, but the resistance fighters who had followed the soldiers from town needed very little help. The soldiers had grown sloppy and overconfident over the last few weeks as the “farming” community had rolled over and played dead. Little did they realize that Charlottesville and the surrounding areas were a shape-shifter refuge. The lack of reported activity on their charts had made the soldiers suspicious, but they hadn’t been suspicious enough.

Robert prowled out onto his front yard as his neighbors and friends handcuffed and tied up the captured soldiers. The leader came out the back door from the kitchen with his hands on his head and a grizzly bear at his back.

Robert couldn’t laugh, but he did draw his mouth back in a feline pant, the closest thing to a smile he could manage. Merry came forward with a very human smile lighting up her face. “They thought you’d be easy pickings out here, Robert, but they didn’t stop to think how vulnerable they’d be split off from their main unit.”

Merry draped an oversize flannel shirt over Robert’s back. Robert shifted, glad to have the covering as he wrapped and tied the shirt around his waist.

“How many are in town?” he asked Merry, afraid of the answer.

“About thirty, with more coming every day,” Merry replied. Her dark eyes flashed, and though her skin was a rich chocolate-brown, Robert could see the flush of anger on her cheeks.

“I guess our peaceful days are numbered,” he said, looking at the bound men and the guns and the pacing grizzly in his front yard.

“This place will always be peaceful. Come what may. It’s not about the land or the buildings on it, Robert. The shelter folks find here comes from the heart and spirit of

your family.” Merry spoke with moisture in her eyes and a hand gripping Robert’s arm.

“What happens when shelter isn’t enough?” Robert asked.

He swallowed and fought hard against the need to shout. He and Merry would have been best friends even if they hadn’t both had ancestors who owed their freedom to Hamilton Croft. That shared bond only made their friendship stronger. Merry’s great-great-grandmother had been a runaway slave who found a place to work as a free woman at Hamilton Croft. Robert’s grandmother had also been a runaway looking for freedom. She’d found freedom and love with Josiah Hamilton-Scott. The only difference between Merry and Robert was that as a human, Merry was now free, but Robert still hid every minute of every day.

“The soldiers are holding twenty-three shape-shifters in town, Robert. They’re going to transport them to a Charlotte research hospital in three days. Trevor is planning to stop them.” Hardy wouldn’t have sent word to Robert. As a Centered shifter, Robert had never offered anything but peripheral support to the cause, and besides, Hardy always acted as if he was Robert’s protector.

“Robert?” Merry said worriedly, looking over Robert’s shoulder, and when he followed her gaze, he saw why.

The grizzly had vanished, and in its place Michael’s Newfie was back, but down, panting and whining and scrabbling at the ground with its paws while the whites showed around its eyes.

Nobody got in Robert’s way as he ran to Michael’s side. He dropped to his knees, burrowed his hands deep into Michael’s fur right above his racing heart.

“It’s okay, Michael. I’m here. Come back.”

His lover’s natural shape-shifter abilities had been tampered with by scientists and their technology, but Robert had never seen a shifter lost. So obviously lost.

Before his death ten years earlier, Robert's grandfather had worn the Centering pendant his wife had given him, because he had loved her and respected her newfound faith even though he wasn't a shifter. By embracing a religion once they escaped the labs, those First Generation shape-shifters had created calm from the madness they'd been given. They had taken new age concepts about the healing energy of stones and meditation and made them their own. Michael needed calm more than anything else at this moment.

Robert went for that pendant, stumbling on his human legs because he was too upset to shift. No one stopped him as he ran inside and up the stairs. He found the familiar pendant in the dresser drawer right where his grandmother had lovingly placed it, soaked with the tears she had shed for her lost mate.

Though he retrieved it in minutes, hours seemed to have passed before he made it back to the Newfoundland's side and held the pendant against its chest.

He was acting on faith and tradition, but he had nothing else to offer, save for the passionate desire to have Michael back where he belonged—with him, in his arms.

Robert allowed that passion to well up unchecked and un-Centered, but welcomed and embraced. There had to be room in his future for control and desire, for peace and passion, because his new life had to have Michael in it.

Someone gasped. The sound might have come from his own lips as the Newfie relaxed under the touch of the pendant and his shaking fingers.

As soon as the dog seemed to ease into a comfortable sleep, it was gone, and Michael lay curled and shivering in its place.

Chapter Seven

He wouldn't accept help, not even Merry's, to get Michael inside. Michael was weak, shivering and unsteady on his feet, but with Robert supporting him on one side, they managed.

Putting aside the information about the captured shape-shifters, Robert left the activists to deal with the soldiers.

Michael needed his help.

He had risked the shift to help Robert. Michael had braved *this* for him.

They made it to the living room, and Robert helped Michael collapse on the sofa, then moved away long enough to light the fire. Fall could be brisk in the Virginia hills, so he brought in kindling and wood every September in preparation. The dried oak sputtered and spit and caught on quickly, but he was scared it wouldn't be enough.

Michael's skin was icy. Colder than cold. It was almost as if his human form couldn't function.

After returning to the sofa, Robert covered Michael's body with his own. He had fastened his grandfather's pendant around Michael's neck without asking permission, but Michael gripped the black agate stone as if it was a lifeline. Faith, superstition, tradition—what did it matter as long as it worked?

"I'm here," he told Michael, just as Michael had told him the day before. Michael moved his hand suddenly from the pendant to Robert. He wrapped his arms around Robert's back and held on as if Robert kept him from falling into an icy abyss, as if Robert kept him whole.

"I'm here," he said again, and Michael's hold eased. The other man's muscles began to relax.

Robert ran his hands over Michael's skin, spreading warmth but also reassuring himself that his lover was back from the nothingness of the shift. Gradually Michael's skin heated, though it took longer than it should have. When his shivering had stopped and his skin had warmed, he finally opened his eyes. They were lighter than Robert had ever seen, almost pale, but as soon as they locked on his, they darkened from pale to gold to bronze.

"I couldn't find my way back to you." He coughed and cleared his throat. "Lost," he whispered.

Robert didn't speak. He simply held Michael, lest the memory of being lost make him cold again.

Robert had never feared the shift. But he was familiar with its chill and its isolation. He could imagine the horror of being trapped in animal form, unable to return.

An unexpected laugh shook Michael's body.

"I guess I've always been lost in one way or another."

Now Robert could see the familiar tilt come back to his lover's lips and the glimmer of gangster come back to his eyes; a spark of wickedness glinted in their depths once more.

"You found me, Robert. I've spent my whole life fighting, but today was the first time I ever had something, *someone*, worth fighting for."

Michael took Robert's face in his hands, but Robert was already leaning toward his lips. They were cool at first, but they grew warm after only a moment of contact. He no longer cuddled a weakened man, but a recuperated shape-shifter. Michael was powerful and ready to kiss him back.

He held Robert's face, firmly but gently, and he deepened the kiss. His tongue dipped into the recesses of Robert's mouth as if he was seeking heat, as if he was hungry for it. Robert opened willingly for this plunder. The

probing of Michael's tongue caused him to burn hot in places that recalled an even hotter probe from earlier in the day.

Robert couldn't stop the sounds Michael's kiss inspired, and he murmured against Michael's lips, hungry sounds, urging him to press closer. But it was Robert who moved his body to settle on top of Michael so their cocks could press together.

Robert couldn't help feeling a thrill at Michael's power beneath him. Michael's skin was kissed by firelight, and in the glow his muscular body was painted with intriguing shadows and flickering secrets. Robert followed the soft illumination on Michael's skin with his tongue here and there. Tasting across his chest, licking down to his abdomen, then tilting so that he could grasp Michael's hardening penis.

Michael moaned when Robert followed the warm, shifting light to the tip and teased his tongue into its cleft. He buried his hands into Robert's hair when he opened his lips to bathe the entire head of Michael's dick with his tongue. His hips tensed when Robert slid his mouth down and slowly took the full length of his hard cock into his wet mouth. Michael was not a small man. Robert grew stiff as Michael's thickness stretched his mouth uncomfortably wide. He remembered this morning when the thickness had stretched him in other ways. His ass was still tender, still sensitized.

Robert worked Michael's perfect cock with his lips and teeth and tongue. Sucking and licking and taking it as deep as he could manage before he had to come up for gulps of air. Michael rewarded his efforts with groans and with the reclaimed body heat coming off his skin. Robert heated him. He pleased him. To be able to bring such a man to this point of vulnerability was heady. He gloried in it. Until Michael could take the stimulation no longer, and then

Robert gloried in the firm hands that lifted him and rolled him onto his stomach.

It was Michael's turn to take control, and Robert allowed it. He let Michael pull aside the shirt and bare his ass to the firelight. Suddenly a hot tongue teased him, flicking over his tender hole. But it was the silky fall of Michael's hair that caused him to gasp and restlessly move his hips. It caressed over his skin, and its softness, its wildness, combined with what Michael was doing with his tongue, almost sent Robert over the edge before Michael even reached to pull his cheeks apart and settle his cock between them.

When Michael did settle and press his aroused penis into a saliva-slickened ass, Robert started to climax before he'd even been penetrated. Michael had to hold Robert's hips and rock against the muscle contractions in order to force his way inside. Then he continued to rock as Robert gripped his cock with the most intimate muscles he possessed.

As Robert rode the long wave of release, taken even higher by the head of Michael's penis filling him completely, Michael tensed and called out his name, and the flood of Michael's semen spurted deep inside his ass, warm and wet. They had made love the morning before, but this time brought them closer because of the danger they'd faced together. This was a claiming of their connection and a reassurance. He was here in Robert's arms, not lost. Robert was here for him, not closed off and unapproachable.

Afterward Michael dozed against him.

Robert reached to touch a chunk of Michael's hair that had fallen forward as they made love. He could never resist this hair. So many colors. So rich and vibrant. So *Michael*. He had brought chaos into Robert's life, it was true, but he had also brought life and passion and hope. Robert had been on hold for so long. Busy, true, always busy—tending the sick, managing the farm, but on hold nonetheless. Hiding. His whole life was about hiding.

Until now.

He had been waiting for his mother, but that wasn't the only reason he had stayed at the farm. He had been afraid to leave the familiar, the comfortable. But it seemed he'd been waiting for something else, as well.

Someone else.

Michael.

Meeting Michael's passion and sharing it, allowing himself to experience his desire without holding back had given him the courage to face the unknown. Robert had always been Centered and competent and strong. But he could be other things. Adventurous and brave. Daring, and maybe, just maybe, a little bit in love with a gangster.

Chapter Eight

Michael was sleeping.

Robert entered the bedroom and was reminded of that first morning when a dangerous shape-shifter had found shelter in his home. Then, as now, the sun had filtered in through handmade curtains like glowing fingers to caress Michael's face. Then, as now, he'd been fascinated by the way the light seemed to play in the waves of Michael's hair.

He approached his sleeping lover very differently than he had approached the stranger, however.

Boldly stalking through the hazy light of dawn to reach the bedside was as natural as the steady heartbeat in his chest. Michael still slept restlessly, his body tense as if he expected to wake from his dreams to find himself in the heat of battle.

But Robert was no longer nervous or afraid.

Michael would never be tamed, and that was a good thing. His worldly roughness had called Robert's courage to life.

Gently, not ready to wake the other man, Robert reached for the sheet and slid it softly off Michael's sprawled form. His lover's skin was naturally darker than the pale cotton. Not tan but latte, liberally dusted with light golden hair. So perfectly sculpted and toned that he could have been a statue, lovingly chiseled to life by trembling fingers guided by a breathless, appreciative muse. But unlike a statue, Michael's body was very alive. So warm and full of potential passion, the sheet heated Robert's fingers everywhere it had touched Michael's skin.

Even sleeping, Michael seemed ready to rumble. The teasing tickle of the sheet sliding off his hips and groin had even stirred his penis to life. Robert's cock swelled in response as he watched Michael stir. His lover's dick hardened and curved until it twitched restlessly against his muscular thigh. Robert stilled as the shifter on the bed hmmmmed into his pillow and then rolled over to lie flat on his back.

Could there be a hotter sight?

The beautiful man in his bed was perfectly positioned for what he intended to do, and Michael's cock seemed to anticipate what was about to happen. It was fully engorged, tipped with blushing red and rising almost to his navel.

Robert undid his trousers to free his aroused flesh. He wrapped his hand around it, surprised by how rampant and aching the mere sight of Michael could inspire him to become. He couldn't resist fisting and stroking himself as he lowered to the bed. The pleasure was intense, magnified when the moist head grazed Michael's leg. His balls tingled and tightened, and his palm grew wet with precome. He eased his grip, knowing that if he was still working his cock when he leaned over to devour his lover's, he would come too soon.

And he had no intention of wasting his come on the sheets.

The second his mouth closed over Michael's massive erection, the other man woke. Beneath his lips, Michael's body jerked and tensed, and he thrust his hips upward, forcing his thick cock to the back of Robert's throat. Robert didn't pull back or protest. Instead he held his breath and swallowed, wrapping the head of Michael's cock in constricting muscles.

"Robert," Michael cried and fisted his hands in Robert's hair.

But Robert wouldn't be guided or paused. He didn't need direction or encouragement. Not this time. He claimed Michael O'Dare, with his mouth, with his lips and teeth and stroking tongue. This time he established the rhythm, and Michael had to hold on as he was taken by a young man who was finally bold enough to grab the wind, to spread his wings and fly.

Robert's lips were stretched, but he didn't let it faze him. He laughed inside as Michael dropped his hands to grab handfuls of the sheets and blankets. His heart soared, and his cock pulsed as Michael gasped and groaned and jerked his hips to meet Robert's lips with abandon. Robert's body was rocked by the desperate ramming, and adrenaline rushed as he tried to breathe and pleasure his eager lover at the same time.

The hot length of Michael's penis was soon salty mixed with the sweet musk of precome. Robert reveled in the blending flavors. He stroked his tongue along the smooth underside of Michael's cock each time he pulled back, teasing the insistent tip of his tongue into the slit to lap up all the cream he could before plunging forward to deep throat it again.

Robert's penis was begging for relief. As he continued to suck, he turned his body and straddled Michael's face, feeling his lover's gasping breaths on his thighs. He sought Michael's lips and the heat and suction his dick desperately needed. Michael groaned, causing his lips to thrum against the head of Robert's cock as he moved it against Michael's willing mouth, which opened eagerly to engulf him.

Wet fire surrounded Robert's throbbing flesh, and Michael's loss of control was made manifest by teeth grazing his shaft and a sudden, fierce suction that claimed him almost painfully.

And just then, Robert was treated to a fiery burst of sweet, salty come even as he began to fuck Michael's mouth

in earnest. The hot cock in his mouth pulsed and pulsed, and Michael's body stiffened beneath him. His lover's cries of fulfillment vibrated around his cock, and it was then that he rode a wave of releasing tension that filled Michael's mouth.

His more practiced lover was able to swallow and suck in a rhythm to match the flow of Robert's jetting come, and the sensation that drew out his release was so amazing, he became light-headed. Michael took him so high. Higher than he'd ever flown before.

Then Michael turned him and pulled him into strong arms, and he knew beyond a doubt that it was safe to fly with a gangster who cared.

He was strapped to a metal table. The bite of its chill sucked what little heat his body managed to generate, which wasn't much considering how long it had been abandoned to nothingness.

When he regained consciousness, he wouldn't have been able to move even if his arms, legs and chest hadn't been bound.

He was alone.

He rolled his eyes to verify the blessed solitude as soon as he had control of them.

It wouldn't last.

It never did.

Beeping machines were attached to his face by gummy electrodes, and a cart full of dully glinting implements sat nearby. He tried to ignore the pull of the wires against his tender skin. He rolled his eyes to turn his glance away from the tools he was already intimately acquainted with.

The cold numbness was wearing off. The discomfort of the wires was nothing compared to the bone deep throbs of pain that began to claim him. Tiny shards of glass seemed to ride through his bloodstream and embed in vulnerable marrow.

The pulsing stabs made his memories even foggier. He recalled nightmarish glimpses of raw meat, mating frenzies and sharp agony much worse than what he now endured. Needles, scalpels, saws and pins. The freezing cold of the shift and the Molotov cocktail burn of chemicals injected into his veins.

Hell.

Michael fisted his fingers, then spread them again, one by one. It was pure instinct to try. He had always been a fighter. The gangs didn't raise 'em any other way. Was that determined nature a salvation or damnation in this place? He feared he knew the answer. After all, there was a reason scientists preferred gang babies in their labs.

"Ten minutes forty nine seconds on my mark," a disembodied voice intoned.

Michael had become human enough in the last ten minutes forty nine seconds to be embarrassed when a pool of hot urine spread beneath him in response.

"We held the wolf for seventy two days with batch number Zeta Five Zero One Three B, Doctor," the voice continued.

Michael fisted his hands again, and this time he was able to lift them an inch off the table to test his bonds. His movement was so feeble, he barely managed to jingle the buckles of the straps that held him fast. But he tried again and again.

"Shall we go for seventy three?" another voice replied, the doctor's. And even Michael's ringing ears could pick up the anticipation mixed with smug satisfaction in the scientist's voice.

"Yes, Doctor," the first voice responded.

A sudden clicking of heels rang out on the tiled floor. Michael's heart pounded. He had exhausted his ability to move. His hands and legs could only twitch as the sound came closer, the nurse disembodied no longer.

With everything human he had left, Michael tried to protest, but his “no” came out as nothing but a feeble gurgle.

The dreaded white blur of a lab coat filled his world, and the sharp sting of a needle in his arm stole it all away.

The house was quiet. Too quiet. When Michael woke from the nightmare, Robert was gone.

Michael’s knees grew weak when he remembered the pleasure in Robert’s dark brown eyes. He closed his own eyes, seeing the gold hair that shimmered with silvery highlights, unbound and spread across his abdomen. Natural. Only for him in the privacy of their bed. He had wondered what it would be like to wake up beside one special person, and now he knew.

He rose from the bed and walked through the silent house, breathing in Robert’s spicy scent along with the scents of home—fresh-baked bread, sun-dried linens, crisp-clean soap.

He was no longer willing to be that selfish gang baby who spent his days and nights using others to survive. He didn’t want to live in a miasma of sweat, alcohol and desperation. And he was no longer the helpless creature he’d been in the labs for far too long. Robert had helped him become so much more.

Robert wasn’t physically the strongest shape-shifter Michael had ever known, but he did have the strongest heart. Michael thought he knew where the other shape-shifter had gone. The way Robert had taken charge during their lovemaking was all the evidence he needed that the other man was ready to do more than hide. And if Robert’s heart led him into battle, Michael would follow, all the way to hell and back if necessary.

It would have been easy for a former gang baby to determine this wasn’t his fight. Charlottesville wasn’t his

turf. None of the rebels, human or shape-shifter, were part of his gang. And yet Robert was no longer a stranger, not by a long shot.

For the first time in his life, saving his own skin wasn't his first priority.

* * *

Charlottesville had once been a growing city near a respected university. It still was. There were football games on weekends and an influx of student residents every fall. But the city also had a simmering underground of antigovernment activists who thought human rights should be extended even to those who were human only part of the time.

Shape-shifters had been created by man, but they were sentient beings with hopes and dreams and the right to freedom.

The truth of that lived all the way to his bones, but approaching Trevor Hardy made his palms sweat and his heart beat faster than a shrew's.

As Robert stepped into the basement the resistance was using for their strategy session, the rumble of Hardy's voice vibrated across his skin before he came close enough to hear his words.

"We'll need someone who can go small to deal with the locks."

Robert felt very small when Hardy's dark eyes locked on him, but he didn't stop; he didn't back away. Michael had helped wake him up. There was a cry for action beneath his skin that he'd always denied before. It was Michael's passion that had made the cry louder, impossible to resist. Robert wouldn't go back into hiding. He walked forward, step by step by step, and it was as if it were the first time in his life he'd stepped away from Hamilton Croft. He'd been

to town many times before, of course, but with every intention of returning home again as quickly as possible. This time he wasn't sure if he would be able to return. This time he stepped into the milling crowd of neighbors and friends and strangers who had joined in supporting the shape-shifter cause, and he was exposed and very, very alone.

"You said you need someone who can go small. I can go smaller than anyone else." Robert forced his fists to open and relax, refusing to be intimidated by the big man who had always scared him with his obsessive devotion.

"We don't need a distraught lover getting in our way," Hardy growled, and everyone turned to look at Robert. Merry rolled her eyes, and it helped. Merry had long accused Hardy of carrying a torch for Robert. She must have seen his words as evidence of that.

Everyone saw Hardy as a hero. Robert had always seen him as a magnet for trouble. Deep down, he'd always worried Hardy's rebellious activities would bring even more negative attention to the shifters in Charlottesville. But there were some troubles that were destined to find you no matter how well you were hidden.

"I can do this, Trevor," Robert insisted, calm even though his heart continued to pound.

Shape-shifters never knew which animals they could call until they tried and either succeeded or failed. Robert had never known his father, but his mother had confessed that he was human. Just as his grandfather had been human. His grandmother's genes were very powerful indeed. Robert could shift into numerous forms, and one of them would be as small as Hardy could possibly need.

"He's right, Trevor."

"Listen to him."

"Robert can do it."

He appreciated the chorus of support around him, especially because his knees were trembling. Their confidence in him came primarily from their trust in his grandmother and grandfather—she, one of the strongest shape-shifters ever known; he, descended from a long line of Hamilton-Scotts who had nurtured the community with bravery, generosity and goodwill.

“Not alone.”

The crowd fell silent.

Michael had followed him. He came to stand with Robert, very close and warm at his back. Robert had come alone, but he wasn’t by himself after all.

Hardy flicked a dark glance at the newly arrived shifter, then refocused on Robert almost immediately. He stared into Robert’s eyes as if he could gauge his worthiness and determination.

Robert willed his nerves away. He stood, straight and tall, and met Hardy’s gaze with the hardest gaze he could muster. If he could hurt the soldiers by freeing their prisoners, he would feel somewhat avenged. He couldn’t hide at Hamilton Croft forever. He was going to have to leave, but he would choose when and how—and someone would suffer for it.

Hardy’s eyes widened as if he’d been taken by surprise. He showed emotion in no other way. He just nodded. Once. Twice. A brisk permission.

“We’ll have access to security cameras directly after midnight when one of our undercover people will be able to take them down. That’s when we’ll need to move fast and quiet.” As Hardy spoke, he motioned to a hand-drawn graphic laid out on a nearby table.

“There’s no one better at quiet than me,” Robert managed to joke with a stiff smile.

The night was clear and cold. The military had set up a temporary base of operations in an unused block of industrial land that had been for sale for so long that the sign advertising its availability was now faded and sagged lopsided on its wire stand.

Like a grim circus come to town, the olive drab tents and quickly erected mobile trailer offices crowded the empty lots until almost no grass was left to stand tall and scraggly in between. Humvees and black SUVs took the place of garishly painted boxcars. But there were cages filled with sad and desperate creatures, longing to be free.

While Michael waited with the others, unseen but not more than a half a mile away behind a vacant building, Robert moved from cage to cage. Some of the captured shape-shifters were children—scared, shivering children who knew to quiet the whimpers of the youngest when the silent lynx moved among them.

So young to have had to develop such survival skills.

Grasping a tool Hardy had given him in his mouth, Robert opened their cages first. His wildcat was small enough to weave in and out of the closely stacked cages and graceful enough to do it in silence.

Robert established a rhythm. Insert. Twist. Move on. Soon all the cages were unlocked and several of the freed adults were comforting and carrying the sniffing youngsters.

“I can’t walk. My leg’s broken.” The nearby whisper sounded familiar.

Quickly he padded to his mother’s side.

“Robert?” Melody Hamilton-Scott was barely recognizable even to her son. Months ago, she’d left Virginia to travel west as a hale and hearty middle-aged woman who could shift into bear, eagle, wolf and mountain lion. Now she was pale and shivering, her features pinched

with pain. She'd lost at least twenty pounds, and she'd never carried extra weight to begin with.

Everyone capable of carrying her already had their arms full. Robert shifted, ignoring his nudity, and reached for his mother. He picked her up and held her close.

"I've come for you, Mom. I won't let them take you away. It's time to go home."

"Home is wherever we're safe...and free, Robert," Melody Hamilton-Scott found the energy to reply. "I should have known that... I should never have asked you to stay."

"I wanted to stay. I don't think I could have left...then," Robert replied, smoothing his mother's hair. In the pale wash of moonlight, there were long roots where her natural color showed. He couldn't be sure in the darkness, but he thought her hair might be more red than anything else. It bothered him that he hadn't known what his mother's real shifter hair was like. Suddenly that simple realization ate at him. More than losing Hamilton Croft. More than the risks they took tonight.

Deep in his heart of hearts, an angry determination rose up. He would get his mother to safety. He would help her heal. And they would never dye their hair again.

Just then an alarm went off. Shape-shifter ears could sometimes be more sensitive than human ones even when they were in their human forms. His mother cringed and buried her face in his neck. Robert gasped and whirled to see if soldiers were already mustering. He saw moving shadows everywhere instead. Lurking in the alleys created by tent and trailer, skulking around corners, hovering near this Humvee and that SUV. When the soldiers came from their impromptu barracks, they would be met by teeth and claws.

Robert would have joined the shadows.

The anger that had risen when he'd seen his mother's condition hadn't been chased away by the alarm. He wanted

to shift and wait with his most ferocious resources to punish the hateful bastards for what they had been willing to do to helpless children and injured women.

Suddenly Michael was there, lifting the frail woman from Robert's arms.

"Hurry," he urged.

He moved to leave the cages behind, but Robert didn't follow.

Instead he called his tiger faster and with more ferocity than he ever had before. Its predatory cry rose up as soon as its throat was formed, and that cry burned all the way to its—his—belly.

Michael froze and turned back to see what Robert had done.

"No, it's too dangerous. Come with me. We have to get her out of here."

Robert couldn't reply. He couldn't say he trusted Michael to get his mother to safety, that he had to do this, had to fight back after so many years of accepting his role as a fugitive.

It was a very un-Centered act to take on the power of his tiger to fight the soldiers rather than running away. Un-Centered but right. The rightness of it sang all the way to his claws.

"I'll be back. I'll come back for you," Michael promised, and illuminated by nothing but moonlight, he was no longer a gangster. He was a guardian angel protecting the woman in his arms and vowing to protect Robert, as well.

Robert turned away from the man he loved and prepared to meet the soldiers as they tumbled from their beds. They would be armed with Tasers and guns, but he was armed with the certainty that he and others like him deserved to exist.

Shape-shifters had the right to claim their freedom.

As he joined those waiting in the shadows, he found he would have the help of friends. He recognized Hardy's scent, piney and sharp, and some instinct urged him to pad to the big man's side.

"Get out of here, Robert. We can handle this," Hardy growled, and as always, Robert thought in spite of Hardy's human blood, he had a bear somewhere inside of him just waiting to find its way out.

He couldn't argue. He could only press the weight of his tiger body against Hardy's legs to show he intended to stay. If he'd had lips, he would have smiled at the way his mass threw Hardy off balance. As it was, he settled for flicking his tail, and even that was cut short as the fighting began.

It was one thing to be in possession of teeth and claws; it was another to know how to use them. Robert had to let go of human consciousness more than ever before to allow animal instinct to take control.

Fortunately it was dark.

His future nightmares might be haunted by screams and cries for mercy, but there would be no visions of blood. Only the metallic scent of it filled the night.

When a leaping body brought him to the ground and hot pain flared in his left rear leg, Robert slowed enough to understand he'd been shot. And still instinct had him fighting the press of the larger animal on top of him. He bit and twisted and tried to get free, but the bigger tiger wouldn't let him rise. If he hadn't been so lost to the fight, Robert would have known sooner. As it was, it took the large male's open mouth against his neck for him to hold still long enough for understanding to dawn.

Michael.

He had come back to help. He had risked shifting so soon after his earlier problems. When Robert calmed, Michael rubbed his head against him. Robert longed for lips to kiss his lover's face, but there wasn't time. He settled on

moving his head against Michael's to reciprocate the tenderness. Then the other tiger was gone. He joined the fight that clamored around them, and Michael would fight with experience, not mere instinct.

Many died. Human and shifter, soldier and friend.

And Robert was a part of it. The painful birth of sovereignty.

Finally the pace slowed, and the night became silent once more.

Robert limped among the fallen because of his injured leg.

"I never knew," a nearby voice choked out. Robert stopped his feline body to turn toward the sound. "I never knew how strong you could be."

Trevor Hardy was dying. Robert could hear it in his voice, gravelly but no longer full of bear. He could do nothing except lie beside his friend, and that he did immediately. He didn't even mind when Trevor weakly stroked a hand across his back as if he were a beloved pet. The big rebel needed comfort, and Robert gave it willingly.

"I thought you needed someone to take care of you. I never realized you needed to fight by someone's side. He's a lucky man. A very lucky man."

If Robert could have responded, he would have protested that he was the lucky one.

"No one's better at quiet?" Trevor asked, and even a fit of coughing didn't detract from the humor in his voice. "I'm glad I got to hear you roar."

And with that, the bearish man faded away, until nothing was left but the empty shell of a man Robert had once feared, but now respected with all his heart.

Chapter Nine

It took Robert, Michael and Melody several weeks of clandestine travel to reach Montana. It was no longer a state but belonged to a group of Free Western Territories that stretched across most of the Midwest and into Mexico. There were too many shape-shifters, and more being born every day. Too many to own, too many to control and far too many humans who fought the idea of their neighbors being kept in cages.

Even as the territories struggled to establish a form of government, the U.S. government was bombarded by activists and legislators who refused to accept that rights could only be claimed by those who were born outside of laboratories. There were places like Virginia that had become unsafe for shape-shifters, but times were changing. And support was growing for a ban on experimentation.

As more and more shape-shifters and shape-shifter sympathizers banded together, times would continue to change. The soldiers could worry towns like Charlottesville to pieces, but those pieces would come together, regroup and survive.

During their travels, Michael wore Josiah Hamilton-Scott's pendant, and gradually he began to gain control over his shifting abilities once more.

He would never be completely Centered. He wasn't a religious man. There would always be a hint of gangster in his wicked smile and his sexy walk, but he would also never be the same out-of-control young man he'd once been.

And Robert?

Robert wore his pendant as he always had, but he also shed it at just the right times.

Snow fell, and Robert sneezed against the flakes tickling his wolf's nose. They had traveled as wolves from a remote cabin to the refugee camp because of the snow and because they had wanted to run and leap, together, in the winter-kissed woods.

In the growing camp that was beginning to look more and more like a frontier town, Robert's mother was recovering from the broken leg she'd suffered during her capture. Robert's grandmother was settled in her new log home, and she was quilting again. She and his mother had sent word of their safe arrival to Robert, but it had never arrived. Telephone and Internet communications were too closely monitored, so it wasn't safe to use anything but a brave courier.

Unfortunately, no matter how brave, couriers didn't always make it through.

Robert shifted once he was inside. In a tiny foyer created by a hutch and a bench they'd brought all the way from Virginia, he quickly donned warm, dry clothes. His mother came to him, then, with a fresh towel and a smile. Melody Hamilton-Scott was in a cast, but she maneuvered well on crutches. She was growing stronger every day. While Robert dried his hair, his mother stepped to the window to watch her new son-in-law begin to split firewood outside. Sunlight reflecting off the fresh snow gleamed through the window to create a burnished halo out of her silky hair. It *was* mostly red. And beautiful.

"Your father was a scientist in the labs, Robert. I've never told you. It would have been like telling a Jewish child that their father was a Nazi." His mother's confession caused the windowpane to fog, because she didn't turn to look at him as she spoke.

“But how?” Robert asked. He sought the reassurance of Michael’s presence. His lover’s body was a blur through the condensation on the glass, but he was there. Robert watched him move as his mother continued.

“I was sixteen and foolish. I went into town alone to meet...a friend...named William Hardy. I was crazy in love with him. We were going to—Well...I never reached him that night. Soldiers found me. I should have pretended to be human. I might have passed. But I panicked and shifted, and they caught me easily.”

Robert went to her side. He could hear remembered fear and pain in the voice that was usually so calm and steady. It hurt to hear her voice waver.

“I lived in captivity for three months. I’d heard your grandmother’s stories, but nothing prepared me for the helplessness.”

Robert had always known there were secrets surrounding his father’s identity, but he had never guessed how ugly they might be. His hand on his mother’s arm would be useless, but he placed it there anyway. He wanted to bring her back to the present and support her as memories of the past caused her pain.

“He saved me. I’ll never forget what it was like to be in that cage and then free of it. He let me out and secreted me away from the laboratory. I was grateful. It was an intense situation, and we were both young. He didn’t force me, Robert, but he didn’t love me either. I would say he had mixed feelings. He didn’t want to see me in a cage, but he feared me a little bit, as well. One morning when we were close enough for me to find my way back home, he disappeared.”

Robert’s mother finally turned to face him. Her deep brown eyes were haunted, but not sad. In fact, a small smile tilted her lips.

“That experience made me raise you to be afraid. Only, your grandmother was right. She always says, ‘genes will out.’ You’re brave like your father was.”

“He wasn’t brave enough,” Robert protested, thinking about all the years he’d seen his mother living without a partner. His father had missed so much.

“Wasn’t he? Years later I learned the laboratory where I had been kept had burned to the ground, killing everyone inside. But no shifters. *The cages were all found empty.* They had been freed. I think he went back. I think your father was a hero like so many others who choose to unlock and unleash. They’ve yet to build a cage that can stand against empathy. I never told you because I was afraid it would make you too bold.”

“But genes will out,” Robert whispered.

His grandmother. His grandfather. His mother. His father. He had quite a lot to live up to, and for the first time in his life, he was up to the challenge.

They all dreamed of Virginia, but for now, they were happy to be safe and reunited. Home was where the people who loved you lived after all. There were times when hiding wasn’t an option. There were times when safety and freedom had to be fought for, searched for and claimed. By banding together with other shape-shifters, they would one day win the ultimate freedom of returning and reclaiming their home.

“I’m glad you told me,” he said, pulling her into a tight embrace.

“It was time,” his mother replied, and this time her voice didn’t waver.

* * *

Robert was happy to have Michael all to himself when they finally made it back to their own cabin and came in out of the cold.

They had banked the fire in the woodstove, so the room was warm and welcoming as they shifted and hurried inside. Michael still didn't like to shift alone, but he no longer had any problem reclaiming his human form. He stood beside Robert, tall and strong, not shivering and weak. Robert went into his arms anyway. They were both cold from the weather and the shift. Warming themselves with the skin-to-skin glide that was becoming an addiction was as natural as breathing.

Michael laughed as Robert burrowed his nose into his neck. The taller shifter leaned down to give him access to that hidden hollow. The next laugh came low and wicked when Robert replaced his nose with a nip and a lick and a nuzzle from his lips.

Michael had brought playful passion into his life. How had he ever been happy a day in his life without it?

It was no accident that a plush rug lay as close to the woodstove as was safe. They dropped to their knees on it, facing each other in the waning twilight. It was the warmest spot in the house and their favorite to share.

The radiating heat caused Robert's skin to flush and prickle all along the side nearest to the fire, but he hardly noticed. Michael caressed him, and everywhere he slid his hands was much, much hotter. He was never shy, never hesitant. He always touched Robert as if his skin was a temptation he refused to resist—and Robert always felt bold when he responded in kind.

Michael's skin had already warmed. Robert moved his hands over its smoothness, loving the curve of solid muscle and the way Michael's breath caught when he dipped them lower.

Michael kissed him as Robert cupped Michael's balls. The strength of Michael's mouth on his betrayed his lover's excitement. Michael raised his hands to hold Robert's face as Robert stroked the increasing length of his lover's hardening cock. He loved the thrill of holding him, pleasuring him while his breath caught. He loved that this gangster was his to love. And he did love him with a passion that would have been frightening only a few months ago.

Michael pulled back from Robert's lips, and he followed, only stopping his forward momentum by grabbing Michael's hips. Michael laughed, easily and lightly, as he lay down and stretched out in front of the stove. Robert stayed on his knees, and fluttering began deep and low in his stomach when his lover rolled over onto his stomach. The flutter was soon followed by a surge of desire that went straight to his cock, making it painfully hard and eager to take advantage of what Michael offered.

This would be a first for them, and Robert's hands shook when he reached for the nearby bottle of lubricant that had been warmed by the fire. He opened it and carefully drizzled glistening drops onto his lover's cleft. He followed their trail, spreading moisture with trembling fingers until he found and fingered Michael's tight, dark offering just as Michael had fingered him many times before. That Michael was being vulnerable for him this time made his cock so hard, he thought he would come too soon. Michael gripped his finger with his most intimate muscles, and Robert was suddenly eager to have his cock gripped instead. Quickly he slicked more lubricant onto his shaft before tossing the bottle aside. He grasped Michael's cheeks and parted them, revealing the hole he couldn't wait to claim.

"Yes, like that, Robert. Just like that," Michael urged as Robert pressed the head of his cock against him.

And then they could only vocalize with moans as they came together in a new way. With Michael submitting to

Robert. Tight, impossibly tight heat enveloped him. Michael wasn't a virgin. Robert was able to take him much harder than he had ever been taken himself. He worked his dick in and out of Michael's ass, racing the building pressure that pulsed from his balls to the swollen head until he finally caught up in a long, tense release. He filled Michael with his seed, and his body shook and trembled with the beauty of it.

Afterward they lay in each other's arms, satiated and finally as warm as humanly possible.

"When I woke up that first morning at Hamilton Croft, it was paradise, a sanctuary too good to be true," Michael began, growing serious. His face was flushed, and there was no hint of his usual smile. "I wasn't used to comfort and warmth."

Robert held him tighter, feeling for the boy he'd been and the imprisoned man he'd become.

"I've since discovered that you're the sanctuary, Robert. You carry the comfort and warmth of your home with you wherever you go. I see it in the eyes of your mother and grandmother now that they have you nearby. I see it in the eyes of all the refugees when you reach out to them with helping hands. You share that comfort and warmth with everyone you meet—even me, a devil who doesn't deserve it or you."

The last was said with a gleam in his eyes, but Robert had known him long enough to see the haunted shadows beneath the glow.

Robert continued to hold him, this passionate, loyal, amazing survivor, and he was shocked Michael hadn't felt "good" enough for him, when "good" was the last thing he'd needed in his most desperate hour.

He'd needed Michael's wicked challenge to test his courage and enliven his spirit. Without him, he might have stayed at Hamilton Croft one day too long. Without him, he might have lost more than Hamilton Croft—he might have

lost his life. He might have lost his mother. He'd needed Michael's passion to test him and tempt him beyond his boundaries.

And Michael had needed Robert's peace.

Robert pressed up against Michael's side and nuzzled into the soft curls of his gorgeous shifter hair, which had dried by the fire until it was a heavenly fall of silk.

"You're no devil, Michael O'Dare. A devil wouldn't have come to my side that day when the soldiers came. A devil wouldn't have given me time to gather my courage to act on the heat between us. You're a wicked temptation, it's true, but you're not a devil."

"I love tempting you." Michael brushed his fingertips across one of Robert's bare shoulders and down to the curve of his hip. "I love you," he continued, and it was a whisper against the crook of Robert's neck as he pressed several kisses there.

The words weren't easy for Michael. The other man had known passion and fury and adventure and hardship in his life, but he had known very little love.

That he could say "love" and claim affection gave Robert more of a glimpse into Michael's true self than anything he'd done before. He was no devil. He was an angel—a little bit fallen, a little bit tarnished, but an angel nonetheless. He'd come to Hamilton Croft when Robert had needed to spread his wings, when he'd been too used to controlling his flight to fly.

"I love you too," he murmured against Michael's lips.

And as night fell outside, Robert found home again in his beautiful gangster's arms.

About the Author

After many years as a suburbanite whose only experience with the wilderness was in braving outlet store sales, Jacqueline Barbary followed a seductive devil into the wilds of the Blue Ridge Mountains. There she spends her days immersed in passionate stories as dark and lovely as her surroundings, with only an occasional foray into civilization for mint cappuccino and shoes.

PS—the seductive devil was worth it!



Where no great story goes untold.

The variety you want to read, the stories authors have
always wanted to write.

With new releases every week, your next great read is just a
download away!

Keep in touch with Carina Press:

Read our blog: www.CarinaPress.com/blog

Follow us on Twitter: www.twitter.com/CarinaPress

Become a fan on Facebook:

www.facebook.com/CarinaPress



ISBN: 978 1 4268 9021 5

Copyright © 2010 by Jacqueline Barbary

All rights reserved. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non exclusive, non transferable right to access and read the text of this e book on screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of publisher, Harlequin Enterprises Limited, 225 Duncan Mill Road, Don Mills, Ontario, Canada M3B 3K9.

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

This edition published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

® and ™ are trademarks of the publisher. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Trade Marks Office and in other countries.

www.CarinaPress.com