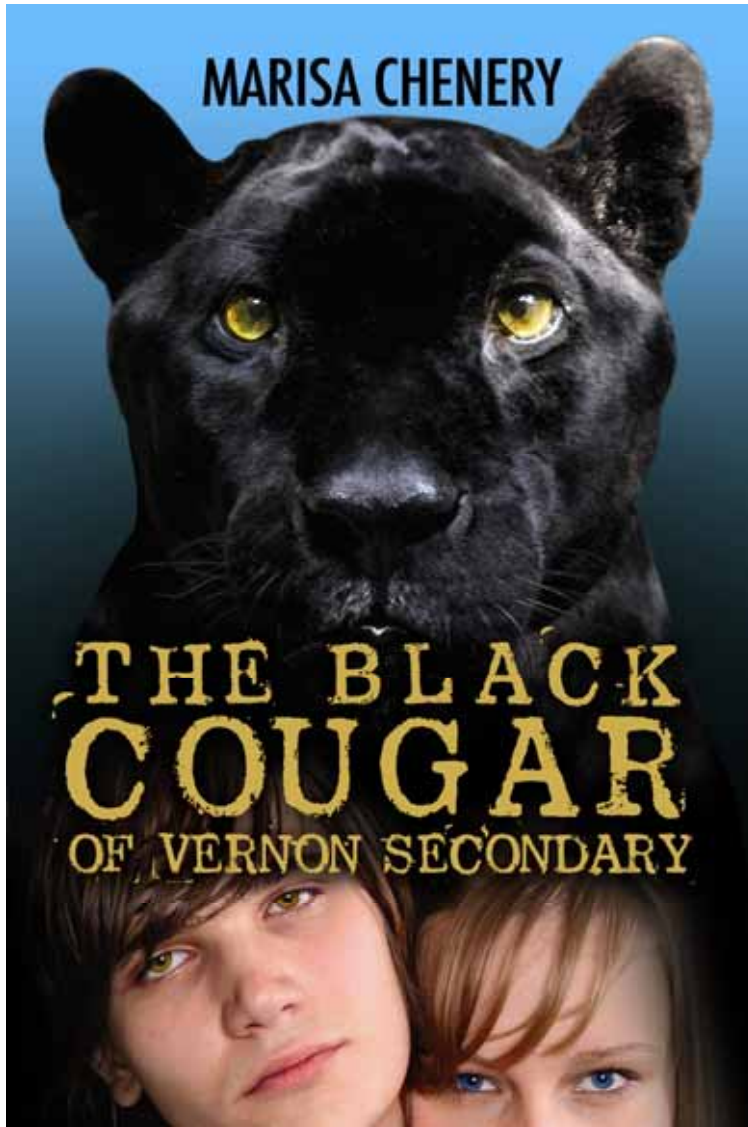


MARISA CHENERY

THE BLACK COUGAR

OF VERNON SECONDARY



THE BLACK COUGAR OF VERNON SECONDARY

by

Marisa Chenery

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Dedication

~~For my family~~

Chapter 1

The school loomed in front of me. My stomach felt queasy just thinking of what I'd have to endure. And oh how I dreaded having to go inside alone. All the other years, I always had my best friend, Cathy, to help brave the first day of school, but not this year. Cathy and her family had moved away from Vernon over the summer. I still felt a little lost without her. We've been best friends since the first grade. Now I'd have to face going through the eleventh grade alone, something I didn't look forward to.

With a deep breath, I slowly made my way to the school's entrance. A group of what looked like grade eight boys jostled me out of their way as they rushed by. I shook my head at their exuberance. Vernon Secondary School, in British Columbia, teaches grades eight to twelve. It seemed to me that each year the eighth graders got younger-looking. The group of boys that had just passed me sounded as if none of their voices had even started to change.

I adjusted the strap of my backpack on my shoulder and sighed before I pulled open the door to the school. The lobby

was overly full as other students crowded around the class lists hanging on the wall as they tried to find their homerooms. I decided to hang back until the crowd thinned a bit. Once I didn't have to fear getting trampled by a bunch of thirteen-year-olds, I went to find my name on the list of homerooms. I found the T's and ran my finger down the sheet of paper until I came to my name—Mika Taylor. I groaned to myself when I found it. I had Math for my homeroom. I hated Math, and to have it first thing in the morning didn't help matters any.

I still had another ten minutes before the first bell rang, but I decided to go to my homeroom anyway. It wasn't as if I had any friends to meet up with first. Cathy had been my only friend at school. I'm not the type of girl who fits in with the popular crowd. Never an out-going person, I've always had trouble making friends. Not that I'd be accepted in the popular crowd even if I could bring myself to be more out-going. I just wasn't like them. I didn't have the need to have a bunch of friends to hang out with. Cathy had been more than enough for me.

It didn't take me long to find my Math classroom. Since I arrived before anyone else I had my choice of seats. I picked a desk in the front row. I pulled out one of my new binders from my backpack and placed it on the center of the desk, then with pencil in hand, I waited for the bell to ring.

More kids started to trickle in and the other desks around me were slowly taken. Mr. Morrison, the Math teacher, arrived a couple of seconds before the second bell rang. As he

pushed the door closed, one last kid slipped inside.

I tried not to stare when Trent Hunter walked by me as he headed for an empty desk at the back of the classroom. I'd developed a major crush on him last year, and from the way my heart pounded at seeing him again, I knew I still had one. Not that Trent had ever given me the time of day, but it still didn't stop me from admiring him from afar. Trent was a full-blooded Okanagan Indian. I could spend hours staring at his copper-colored skin and long black hair. What I wouldn't give to have his brown eyes look at me with interest just once.

When Mr. Morrison started to address the class I brought my wayward thoughts back under control. I kept my eyes focused on the front of the classroom as the teacher passed out our schedules and gave us our locker numbers. Halfway through the class, I couldn't resist taking a quick look behind me at the back of the room. My gaze unerringly latched onto Trent. He had his head down as he wrote something in his binder. I sighed to myself and focused back on the teacher.

The rest of the class seemed to fly by. After the bell rang at the end of the period, I stuffed my binder back into my backpack and left the class. I made sure I didn't look at the back of the room when I walked through the door. With my new schedule in my hand, I walked down the hall, looking at the schedule to see what class I had next. I had Science, another subject that didn't thrill me.

Science turned out to be boring, and I didn't have Trent in this class for distraction. Ms. Syler droned on about what

we would learn this year and the various assignments we were expected to complete. The bell couldn't ring soon enough.

My next class was English, which I liked. I'm a bit of a bookworm. I've always loved to read. I love to get lost in other worlds and places, to experience someone else's life through the pages of a book. Reading lets me escape the boring realities of my own life for a time. As in my other two classes, I sat at the front of the room.

With English over, I dreaded what came next—lunch period. Even though we didn't have that many classes together, Cathy and I always sat together in the cafeteria during lunch. I hated to eat alone. Nothing screamed "loser" more than having to sit at a table by yourself.

Since I took my time getting to the cafeteria, most of the tables were already full. Then I spotted an empty one close to the cafeteria doors. I quickly made my way over to it and sat down in one of the chairs at the end. I pulled my bagged lunch out of my backpack and set it on the table. As I pulled out my sandwich, I wished I'd remembered to bring a book to read. If I had, I could have gotten lost in my own little world while I ate. That way I wouldn't have felt as if everyone stared in my direction.

Determined to get through lunch without feeling too uncomfortable, I picked up my sandwich and started to eat. I kept my gaze down, not wanting to see if anyone stared. The other end of my table soon became occupied by three eighth grade girls. I groaned to myself. They spoke in loud voices as they gushed over all the older high school boys they'd seen. I

glanced over at them. All three of them were pretty, and were dressed in the latest style. Not like me. I dress for comfort, not style. My jeans may be a couple of years old, but I had them broken in just the way I liked them. The pale pink t-shirt I wore with my jeans may have been plain, but it's one of my favorites. I knew these girls would have no trouble finding boyfriends.

By this time I'd finished my sandwich. I pulled out the rest of what Mom had packed in my lunch—a juice box and some chocolate chip cookies. As I munched on the cookies, I looked up at the big clock on the wall across from where I sat. I still had another fifty minutes before lunch would be over. Now that I'd looked up, I quickly scanned the crowded cafeteria, hoping to catch a glimpse of the one person I wouldn't mind staring at me.

I'd taken a sip from my juice box when I found where Trent sat, alone as usual. I sucked in a breath when I realized for once he stared right at me, which in turn made me choke on my juice. I couldn't tear my gaze away from him, even though I must have looked really strange with my face flushed as I tried to cough up one of my lungs. Trent gave me a crooked smile as I continued to choke. Embarrassed, I quickly looked away. Once I could breathe again, I gathered up what remained of my lunch and slung my backpack over my shoulder. I was sure I looked like crap with my streaming eyes and hot face. I threw the rest of my lunch in the garbage can on the way out of the cafeteria.

I ducked into the girls' washroom. When I caught a

glimpse of myself in the large mirror on the wall, I grimaced. My face was slightly red and my eyes still watered a tiny bit. “Smooth move, Mika,” I whispered to my reflection in the mirror.

A damp paper towel cooled down my face, and also took care of my eyes. Trent had finally noticed me, and I of course had to make myself look like a dork by choking. *Real attractive. Not.* I’d be lucky if he ever looked my way again. If Cathy had been here, she would have told me not to let it bother me—that I should take it as a good sign that Trent actually looked right at me. I tried to tell myself those very same things, but it didn’t sound as convincing without Cathy being the one to say them.

I gave myself a final look over in the mirror. I ran my fingers through my long hair. I have naturally dark blonde hair, which I got from Mom. My hair and blue eyes are my best features. Everything else about me is average. Average height, average looks, average body. I stuck my tongue out at my reflection. I then took a deep breath and left the safety of the girls’ washroom. Not wanting to go back to the cafeteria, I decided to spend the rest of lunch outside.

* * * *

My final two classes, Gym and History, proved to be uneventful. By the time the last bell of the day rang I felt more than ready to go home. If today had been any indication, this school year would be one I couldn’t wait to have over.

At least I didn’t have to take the bus to school this year. Over the summer Dad had bought himself a new car and ge-

nerously donated his old one, an eight-year-old Nissan Sentra in metallic grey, to me. It wasn't much to look at, but it got me around wherever I wanted to go.

The parking lot became a mad rush as everyone tried to leave the school at the same time. I eased my car into the line-up and inched my way closer to the parking lot exit. While I waited for the next car in front to move up, someone walked between the cars. My hands tightened on the steering wheel as Trent walked in front of my car. He seemed to pause for a few seconds as he turned his head to look right at me through the windshield. There was no mistaking the interest that flashed in his brown eyes. I gulped as I stared back.

A horn-honk came from the car behind me. I jumped and looked in my rear-view mirror to find the boy in the car behind me waving for me to go. I shifted my gaze back to the front of my car only to see the back of Trent as he walked away. The car honked again. I felt tempted to flip the guy off, but thought better of it. With my luck, the guy would get out of his car and start yelling at me if I did it.

On the drive home I couldn't stop thinking about Trent. He'd never acted as if he knew I existed before today. What was so different about today that he finally noticed me? I had no idea. I knew I hadn't changed that much over the summer. If anything, Trent seemed to be the one who'd changed while school had been out. He looked taller. He had to be at least six foot now, and he seemed to have packed on more muscle. I hadn't missed the well-defined muscles on his chest and arms. The black t-shirt Trent wore fit snug enough to show

them off. I'd promised to email Cathy after I got home from school on the first day. I'd have to make sure I told her about Trent not treating me as if I were invisible.

When I arrived at home I parked my car at the side of the driveway so Dad could put his new car in the garage. I pushed open the front door and called out to Mom. "Mom, I'm home." Mom has always been at home for me and my younger brother, Jared.

"I'm in the kitchen, Mika."

I put my backpack on the floor near the stairs and headed to the kitchen. Mom sat at the kitchen table, sipping on a cup of tea. She smiled when I walked into the room. Even though Mom chose to stay at home with her kids rather than leave us at babysitters while she went off to work, it didn't mean she didn't take care of herself. She's just about as slim as I am, and by no means looks forty-five years old. Now that I'm older, we sometimes get mistaken for sisters. Of course Mom loves that. I cringe every time I hear someone call us that.

Mom kicked a chair away from the table for me to sit down. "So, how did the first day of school go, not having your sidekick with you?"

I rolled my eyes as I sat down. "Cathy wasn't my sidekick, Mom. It was okay, I guess."

"You two were just about joined at the hip. I imagine it had to be a bit rough without her at school."

"Yeah, it was a bit tough, especially at lunch."

"Didn't you find any new friends to sit with?"

I shook my head. "No. It's kind of hard to make new

friends when you're considered the freak of the school."

Mom chuckled. "Oh, come on, it can't be that bad."

"Yeah, Mom, it *is* that bad. You know I'm not into the whole clothes and boys thing the girls in the popular crowd are into. I'd rather read a book than go shopping with a bunch of giggling girls any day. And I'm not about to change just so I can fit in."

"I never would expect you to. I just hoped that maybe you met a girl who's new to school and doesn't know anyone."

"Nope. Sorry, I didn't run into any new girls."

"How about boys? Did you see that Okanagan boy you and Cathy used to moon over last year? What's his name?"

"Trent." I felt my face heat up. "Yes, I saw him."

Mom gave me a knowing smile. "If I had to go by how red your face is right now, I'd say he saw you as well."

I placed my hands on my hot cheeks. "Mom!"

"What? Fine, I won't say anything else about Trent. Go on. I'm sure you're just itching to email Cathy all about your first day back at school. I'll call you when dinner's ready."

Glad to escape the kitchen before Mom decided to ask any more questions about Trent, I grabbed my backpack on the way up the stairs to my bedroom. When I walked by my brother's bedroom I heard the sound of one of his video games through his closed door. Jared could spend a whole day doing nothing but playing video games.

Inside my bedroom, I shut the door and turned on my laptop. As I waited for it to boot up, I threw my backpack in

the corner and sat down on my bed. Once the laptop was ready I took it off my dresser and brought it over to my bed. I checked my emails first. I saw Cathy had already emailed me, which didn't surprise me. Patience didn't happen to be one of Cathy's virtues. She probably emailed me the second she got home from school to remind me to email her about how things went on my first day without her.

Sure enough, when I opened her email the first thing I read in capital letters was EMAIL ME. Cathy then proceeded to tell me I had twenty minutes to write back before she sent another email. I opened a new message and started to type up how my school day had gone. I waited until the end of the email to tell Cathy everything in great detail. I knew she'd demand more if I only glossed over it. I told her how Trent had looked at me twice. I hit the send button and sat back to wait for Cathy's response. All of five minutes later, my laptop beeped to let me know I had a new email.

Cathy's second email told me to sign in to my instant messenger. When I signed in she bombarded me with messages. She wanted to know how Trent looked, what he wore today, and anything else I could think of that I hadn't yet told her about him. Wishing Cathy was with me, I spent the next two hours exchanging messages with her. After Mom called me for dinner, I promised Cathy I'd be online tomorrow right after school.

As I headed downstairs, I tried to push thoughts of Trent aside. Now that I'd gone over every detail with Cathy with a fine tooth comb, I'd convinced myself Trent noticing me had

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to be a fluke. Even though Cathy seemed pretty sure Trent would in some way acknowledge my presence at school tomorrow, I had my doubts. It wouldn't surprise me if he ended up looking right through me like everyone else did in the school.

Chapter 2

The next morning, I woke up with one part of me dreading having to go to school, while another part couldn't wait to see Trent again. I dressed with a little more care than I had yesterday just in case he looked my way. I pulled on the new black cords Mom had bought when she forced me to go shopping for new school clothes with her a couple of weeks ago. Instead of one of my regular t-shirts, I chose a short-sleeved lavender blouse—another newly-purchased article of clothing.

I hurried down the stairs to the kitchen. Jared already sat at the table eating his breakfast. He looked up from his cereal bowl when I walked into the room. He smirked at me as he looked me up and down.

“Did somebody die?” he snorted.

I glared at my brother as I sat down across from him and grabbed the box of cereal. “Shut up, Jared.”

“Or you'll do what?”

I ignored him and poured some cereal into the bowl

Mom had set out for me. I reached for the milk, but Jared pulled it closer to him before I could get it. Not impressed, I glared at him once again. "Please pass the milk, Jared."

He shook his head. Jared poured more milk into his bowl until he had more milk than cereal in it. "So if nobody died, it must be because of a boy." He put the back of his hand up against his mouth and made kissing noises against it.

Jared could be the most annoying brother in the world at times. This was one of those times. I'm not much of a morning person to start with so his teasing bugged me more than it would have later in the day. "Knock it off, Jared," I snapped. "Give me the milk or I'll be forced to do something very unpleasant to you."

"I'm so scared." Jared pretended to shake with fear.

"Enough, you two." Mom, who'd been busy making our lunches, came over to the table and took the milk from Jared. She poured some of it into my bowl. She then looked at each of us in a way that said we were walking a fine line. Mom isn't much of a morning person either. "Jared, stop bothering your sister or I'll take back that new video game I gave you."

Jared opened his mouth to protest, but Mom held up her hand to stop him. He slumped down in his chair in defeat and started to eat. Mom turned to me and nodded her head approvingly. "Mika, you look great. It's nice to see you in that outfit. I knew it would look good on you. It'll make you stand out in a crowd."

That, I didn't want to happen. I almost considered going back upstairs to change into something I normally wore, but

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when I glanced at the clock I knew there wouldn't be any time to switch. I quickly finished my breakfast and shoved the bagged lunch Mom handed me into my backpack. I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and then headed outside to my car.

* * * *

I managed to arrive at school early enough that I had my pick of parking spots. I chose one close to the parking lot exit and parked the car. As I crossed over to the school, I looked up at the sky. Even this early in the morning I saw it would be a bright and sunny day. I knew that would soon change. With fall came the rain. At least I didn't have to worry about standing outside in the pouring rain at the bus stop anymore.

Once inside the school I went straight to my locker to grab the books I needed for my morning classes. I took my time since I had fifteen minutes to kill before homeroom started. When I had everything I needed in my backpack I closed the locker door and snapped the lock back in place. The sound of a group of girls headed my way made me look up. I silently groaned to myself when I saw who walked in the center of the group.

Silvia Michaels is the bane of my high school existence. Popular, pretty, as well as the captain of the cheerleading squad, Silvia made sure everyone around her knew how much better she was compared to them. Me, she loved to single out and ridicule at every opportunity she got. I couldn't understand it since I'd never done anything to warrant it.

Silvia sneered at me as she slowed on her way by. "Nice outfit, Mika. Did your Mommy pick it out for you?" She

laughed. "It shows."

I gritted my teeth, determined not to let her rub me the wrong way. I didn't expect anything better from her. Since grade nine Silvia has tried to make my life miserable. She was part of the reason why I didn't try to dress to impress. If I did I usually ended up being the butt of one of her jokes at my expense.

At my continued silence, Silvia stopped walking and turned to face me. "Don't you have anything to say, weirdo? Or did the cat get your tongue?"

"Leave her alone, Silvia."

Both Silvia and I looked over in the direction the deep voice had come from. Trent stood a foot away with a scowl on his face, which he seemed to have directed at Silvia. I felt my heart rate speed up. *Has Trent just stood up for me?*

Silvia gave Trent a big smile as she walked over to him. It was common knowledge that she wanted Trent as her own. When she reached him, she swung her long auburn hair over her shoulder and batted her green eyes up at him.

"Hi, Trent. Since when do you care what I say to the weirdo? A girl has to have her fun. Now that her little friend's gone, she's all on her own. Don't you think that's pathetic?"

Trent's dark brows drew closer together. "There is nothing wrong with being alone. You should try it sometime. Maybe then you'll see how much of a witch you are."

At Silvia's gasp of outrage, I decided to get out while the getting was good now that Trent had distracted her. I didn't know why Trent had done it, but it sent a little thrill through

me knowing that he had. The only other person who had ever stood up to Silvia on my behalf had been Cathy. I hate confrontations and try to avoid them as much as possible.

I arrived at my homeroom class with no further incident. I slipped into my seat at the front of the class and watched as the rest of the kids trickled in. This time Trent arrived before the teacher. His gaze settled on me as he walked farther into the classroom. I quickly looked down at my desk as I felt my cheeks flood with warmth.

The chair beside mine scraped against the floor when someone pulled it out from the desk. I glanced up at the sound. I felt my face flush even more when my gaze collided with Trent's.

Trent smiled. "I forgot my Math textbook in my locker. Do you think I could share yours?"

I nodded and mumbled, "Sure."

"Great. Thanks."

I yelped with surprise when Trent grabbed the leg of my desk in one hand, and the back of my chair in the other. He easily pulled them both closer until our desks were together. He chuckled as he placed my Math textbook in the center of our two desks. The teacher arrived before I could say anything else.

Mr. Morrison eyed our desks as he came to stand in front of the class. "Is there a reason why your desks have been moved together, Mika and Trent?"

Trent spoke up before I could answer. "I forgot my textbook and Mika was nice enough to share hers. I thought it

would be easier if our desks were closer.”

I could hear a couple of girls who sat behind me snicker. Mr. Morrison shifted his gaze to me. “Is this okay with you, Mika?”

“I don’t mind,” I replied in a quiet voice.

“All right then.” Mr. Morrison turned back to Trent. “If you forget your textbook again, Trent, we’ll work something else out. Without you having to move desks around in the classroom. Just make sure you put the desks back where they were at the end of class.”

“Not a problem.”

Mr. Morrison moved over to the chalkboard and started to write out some Math equations. I tried to concentrate on what he taught, but with Trent sitting this close I found it too much of a distraction. I kept giving him sideways glances, unable to keep myself focused on the front of the class. Trent didn’t seem as distracted. He kept his gaze forward, a look of concentration on his face.

When the teacher told the class to open our textbooks to a certain page, Trent and I both reached for my textbook at the same time. As our hands touched, I quickly looked over at Trent to apologize. The words froze in my throat. Trent stared back in a way that made my heart pound in my chest. After a few seconds, he looked away and focused on the textbook as he opened it to the right page.

I scanned the page and realized I really had no idea how to do the equation. Trent seemed to have no such problem as he went to work solving it. While I worked on it, I prayed

Mr. Morrison wouldn't ask me for the answer. I didn't want to look any more like an idiot in front of Trent than I already did.

I grumbled under my breath as I tried to wrap my brain around the Math problem. Trent nudged me with his elbow and pushed his binder closer to mine so I could see his work. In a quiet voice he then said, "I get the feeling you don't like Math very much."

I kept my voice equally quiet. "I hate Math."

"Math is one of my best subjects. Do you want me to explain how I got my answer?"

I nodded my head. I didn't trust my voice when Trent shifted his chair even closer to mine and our shoulders touched. His arm brushed against mine as he pointed to what he had written down in his binder. As if he knew I hadn't been paying attention to a word he said, Trent stopped talking and cocked a brow in my direction. I gave him a sheepish smile as I forced myself to concentrate.

Once I got myself to focus, I found Trent's explanation made more sense than Mr. Morrison's had. I even managed to do the second question on my own, and got the correct answer.

"You've got it now," Trent said encouragingly.

"Only because you showed me an easier way to do it. I still would be lost otherwise."

"If you need help again just ask."

"I'll do that." Before Trent turned back to his work I said, "Ah, I guess I owe you thanks for earlier as well."

"You mean Silvia?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I've somehow managed to end up on her hit list."

"She needed to be put in her place. She's just jealous of you. Try not to take what she says seriously."

I gave Trent a look that said I didn't believe him. "Sure. Silvia's jealous of *me*. I don't think so. I'm just the weirdo with no friends who has nothing going for her. What could Silvia possibly be jealous of me for? She's everything I'm not."

"Exactly."

"Exactly what?"

"You're everything she isn't in a better way and she knows it."

"So my being plain, unpopular, and on the shy side makes me better than Silvia? And you think she wishes she could be more like me?"

Trent smiled and shook his head. "You really think of yourself as plain? Hardly. As for Silvia, she may be popular, but the girls she hangs out with really aren't her real friends. They just want to be seen as members of her popular crowd. You have a real close friend, something Silvia will never have."

I had to collect my thoughts before I spoke again. I was having a hard time getting past the part where Trent had said he didn't think I was plain. "You mean I *used* to have a real close friend. Cathy moved to Vancouver Island with her family over the summer."

"But I bet you still keep in touch with her."

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“Yeah, I do.”

“So you’re still friends.”

“Yeah.” I then said under my breath, “But that won’t stop me from being alone at school.”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

The way Trent looked at me I knew he didn’t believe me. Before he could say anything else the bell rang. I collected my textbook and binder and crammed them into my backpack. As I stood up, Trent pushed my desk and chair back to their original places. I murmured a quick goodbye to him and hurried out of the classroom. I knew that would be one Math class I wouldn’t soon forget.

Chapter 3

Science and English turned out not to be as exciting as Math had been, mostly because Trent wasn't in them. In Science especially, I found myself day-dreaming more than I listened to the teacher. My mind wandered as I thought of what it would be like to have Trent as a boyfriend. Not that I really thought I stood a chance, even though he'd finally done more than acknowledge my existence. I also thought of what Silvia's reaction would be if Trent actually *did* become my boyfriend. That part made me smile. Oh, how it would piss her off to see that the school freak had managed to take the one boy she wanted and couldn't get.

Once the bell rang at the end of English, I hurried to the cafeteria so I could get a table I wanted, preferably one in the back corner. Today I'd remembered to bring a book. I planned to sit out of the way and read until lunch period ended.

I was lucky this time and managed to get a table in the general area where I wanted. I pulled out my lunch and the

book I'd brought from home. Over the summer I'd gotten hooked on reading romance novels, particularly paranormal romances. Anything that had to do with vampires, werewolves, ghosts, shape-shifters, time travel or anything along those lines, I'd read. I couldn't get enough of them.

I'd just gotten to a good part in the book when a now-familiar deep voice asked, "What are you reading?" Before I could answer, Trent pulled the book out from under my hand. I tried to grab it back, but he picked it up before I could stop him. He read the back flap of the book. "Werewolves, huh?"

Judging by how hot my cheeks felt, I knew my face had to be a lovely shade of red. "Can I have my book back, please?"

Trent sat down in the chair across from me and flipped the book over to read the page I'd been reading. My face grew even hotter. "Werewolves and romance. What a combination." He put the book on the table and pushed it over to me. "What about cats?"

I snatched up the book and shoved it into my backpack, not bothering to mark where I'd left off. "What?"

"I take it you like werewolves, but what about cats? In particular cat shifters. Do you like those as well?"

"I've read a couple of cat shifter romances before. I thought they were pretty good." I couldn't believe I was actually having this discussion with Trent of all people.

"So you could see yourself falling for a guy who could shape-shift into a cat and it wouldn't bother you?"

My brows drew together. I had no idea where this conversation could be going. "I guess. Not that I think there are real werewolves and cat shifters out there, mind you."

"Let's say there *is* such a thing as a cat shifter. Would you still not be bothered by it? Wouldn't you run screaming in the opposite direction?"

"In all honesty, I don't think I would. I like to think I'm more open-minded than that." I shook my head. "Is there some reason behind all these questions?"

Trent gave me a crooked smile. "Not really. You seemed to be enjoying your book so I thought I'd come over to see what you were reading. I'm just trying to make idle conversation. Is it okay if I sit here with you?"

Of course I had no problems with Trent joining me. "Are you sure you want to be seen sitting with the weirdo?"

As we sat talking, I'd noticed more than one set of eyes in the cafeteria staring our way. Trent may be a loner, but he was by no means considered an outsider like me. Silvia, who sat a couple of tables away, shot daggers in my direction with her eyes.

"I don't think you're a weirdo, Mika. I really don't care what everyone else thinks. I'll sit where I want and with whomever I want."

"You may survive this, but I have a feeling I'm going to pay for it later." I looked over in Silvia's direction.

Trent turned his head to see who I looked at. He gave Silvia a hard stare until she looked away. "Never mind her. Just ignore her."

I figured that would be easier said than done. “That’s easy for you to say. You aren’t the one she likes to pick on.”

“No, but you aren’t the one she likes to undress with her eyes.” Trent shuddered dramatically.

I couldn’t help myself, I started to laugh. The sound of my laughter drew more stares. After I got myself back under control I said, “Sorry. I guess that’s one thing I should be thankful for.” I giggled. “I’m sure it’s killing her to see you here with me.”

“It’ll do her good. Maybe from now on I should sit with you every lunch. We could protect each other from Silvia.”

My jaw dropped open in shock. I stared at Trent. *He can’t be serious, can he?* “We could?”

“Yeah.” Trent reached across the table and placed his hand under my chin and pushed my mouth closed. “That is, if you *want* me to sit with you.” He took his hand away and leaned in closer. “You don’t mind if I eat lunch with you, do you, Mika?”

“Yeah...no. I mean no, I don’t mind.” Flustered, I blurted out, “But why? It isn’t as if you even knew I was alive until this year!” I blushed and wished I could suddenly take back my stupid comment.

Trent shook his head and smiled a half-smile. “Is that what you think, Mika? That I hadn’t noticed you last year, or the year before that?”

I silently nodded my head. It couldn’t be true. Not once last year had Trent looked my way. I knew, I’d done nothing but watch him every opportunity I got. He never so much as

acknowledged my presence, not even when we happened to pass each other in the hall. Could this be some new torment Silvia somehow had managed to cook up? It wouldn't be the first time. In grade nine when she'd at first seemed friendly, Silvia had gotten the name of the boy I'd liked at the time out of me. She then turned around and told him, and he then proceeded to tell everyone until it had become a big joke.

Trent sighed. "I can see you don't believe me even though it's true. I'm not like Brad, Mika."

I stiffened. Brad had been the boy I'd liked in grade nine. Even after two years it still hurt. I'd hoped it had been forgotten, but obviously someone still remembered how I'd been ridiculed. I started to push back my chair to leave. "I have to go."

Trent's hand shot across the table and took hold of my wrist as he held me in place. "Relax, Mika. I didn't mean to bring that up to throw it back in your face. I know it was Silvia's doing. I only brought it up to tell you I'd never do something like that to you. Brad was an idiot, but he did learn the error of his ways."

I sent my thoughts back to that awful time. A week after Brad had started telling everyone how funny he thought it was that I liked him, he'd suddenly stopped laughing every time he saw me. He'd made a point to not look my way, let alone say anything. I also remembered around that time he'd been sporting an impressive black eye. I quickly put two and two together.

"It was you? You gave Brad that black eye?"

Trent shrugged as if it hadn't been any big deal. "Someone had to teach him to keep his mouth shut."

In a quiet voice I asked, "Why? Why would you do that, Trent?"

He shrugged again. "I don't like to see someone getting picked on when they haven't done anything to deserve it."

My heart skipped a beat. I told myself that Trent really hadn't done it because *I'd* been the one getting picked on. He just liked to look out for the underdog. I'd be letting myself in for a big let-down if I took it to mean something other than that. "Then I guess I have you to thank for that as well. If you keep it up I'll soon have to start calling you my knight in shining armor."

Trent rolled his eyes. "I'm hardly that. You better hurry up and finish eating. Lunch period will be over soon."

I glanced over at the clock. The bell would ring for the next period in ten minutes. *Where's the time gone?* It didn't feel as if an hour had almost gone by already. I figured it had a lot to do with how easy I found it to talk to Trent. I no longer felt nervous around him. I didn't have to watch what I said as I did with other people. He put me at ease. I knew he wouldn't use anything I said against me.

I picked up the sandwich baggie of cookies Mom had given me for lunch. I then noticed Trent didn't have anything to eat. "Where's your lunch?"

"I ate already. I have a spare just before lunch, so I ate then."

"Oh." I felt a bit self-conscious eating in front of Trent

when he didn't have anything of his own. I held the bag out to him. "Do you want one?"

"Thanks. They smell good."

I sniffed the air, but I couldn't smell the cookies through the plastic baggie. Obviously Trent had a better sense of smell than I had. I opened the bag and once he'd taken one, I put the baggie down on the table between us and took a cookie for myself. We munched in silence. I pushed the baggie closer to Trent when he finished his. He smiled and took another one. I watched him as he ate. He had his long, straight black hair pulled back in a pony tail. I'd always admired his hair. There'd been many times when I wanted to run my fingers through it just to see if it was as soft as it looked. Today happened to be one of those days.

"What?" Trent asked with humor in his voice.

My face flushed at getting caught staring. "Nothing." I gathered up the remnants of my lunch. "I better go. I have to stop at my locker before next period."

I stood up and slung my backpack over my shoulder. Trent stood up as well and waited for me. As we walked out of the cafeteria together I took a second to look behind us. More than one person watched us leave. My gaze skipped over to Silvia, who looked more than a little pissed off.

Just outside the cafeteria Trent stopped me. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow first thing in Math." He paused for a second before he added, "I'll save a table for us tomorrow at lunch."

I watched Trent turn and walk away. All the way to my

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locker I wore a stupid grin on my face. It looked as if I wouldn't be quite so alone at school after all.

Chapter 4

I didn't see Trent again for the rest of the day. By the time school had ended I'd replayed what we'd said to each other over and over again in my head.

When I got home from school I went in search of Mom before I went upstairs to my room. I found her in the family room, on the computer. She smiled when she saw me. "So how did school go today, kiddo?"

I grinned back. "Good. Is it okay if I call Cathy on the phone today instead of just emailing her?"

"Your day went *that* good, huh? Sure. Just don't talk for too long. Your Dad'll have a fit if you run up a big long-distance phone bill."

"I promise to keep it as short as I can."

I practically ran up the stairs to my room. After I securely closed the door behind me, I picked up my cordless phone and dialed Cathy's new phone number. Her Mom picked up after the third ring.

"Hi, Mrs. Evans, is Cathy there?"

“Hi, Mika. She just got in. I’ll call her for you.”

I heard Cathy’s Mom call her name. Cathy took no time picking up on the other extension and telling her Mom she had it. She waited until her Mom had hung up before she said anything else.

“What happened?”

I chuckled. “Why do you think something happened?”

“Why else would you phone me instead of emailing me or something?”

“So I have to have a reason to talk to you on the phone? Maybe I just wanted to hear your voice for a change.” I easily pictured Cathy rolling her eyes on the other end of the phone.

“Yeah, right. Come on, Mika, don’t leave me in suspense. Spill.”

“I kind of had an interesting day at school today. At first I thought it would turn out to be crappy, especially after Silvia decided to have another go at me.”

“I wish she’d just leave you alone. If I’d been there I’d have told her to back off. Was it really bad without me there to tell her to get lost?”

“Well, not really. She didn’t get much of a chance to insult me. Someone else stepped in and stopped her.”

“Who?”

“Trent.”

I had to pull the phone away from my ear when Cathy let out a loud whoop. “You have got to be *kidding* me! Trent stood up for you?”

“Yes.” Cathy whooped again.

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"Can you stop yelling in my ear before I go deaf?"

Cathy took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm calm now. No more yelling. What did Trent say to Silvia?"

"He basically told her to leave me alone and stop being such a witch."

"No way!"

"You said you wouldn't yell again."

"Sorry. I just got a little excited there. I now have myself back under control. Did he say anything to you?"

"You could say that. We talked a bit when he sat next to me during Math, but we talked a lot more during lunch. Trent sat at my table."

"Holy crap. What did you two talk about?"

"Not too much really, except for one thing. Do you remember the Brad incident?"

"How could I forget? I was ready to sock him one before someone beat me to it."

"Yeah, that would have been Trent. He gave Brad the black eye."

"Ahhh. Why did I have to move away now that everything has started to get interesting?"

"You can't tell me you haven't found someone as interesting as Trent in your new school."

"Well, there is this one boy in my Geography class, but nope, I'm not going to talk about him. I want to hear more about Trent. I bet Silvia turned green with envy when she saw the two of you together during lunch."

"If looks could kill I'd be dead right now. I can't see her

being able to let this go without getting back at me in some way.”

“Let Trent take care of her.”

I sighed. “I don’t know, Cathy. Even though he said he’d save a table for me to sit with him during lunch tomorrow, I can’t help but feel he won’t follow through.”

“Mika. Stop. If he said he will sit with you tomorrow, he’ll sit with you. You have to stop thinking so negative.”

“It’s just hard to think that the school weirdo could end up with a boy like Trent.”

“Stop calling yourself that. You’re not a weirdo. So you like to have your nose stuck in a book. That doesn’t make you weird. I think Trent and you would be perfect together. Trent’s always been a loner, just like you are in a lot of ways. He obviously doesn’t think you’re strange or he wouldn’t have watched you for the last couple of years. And he had to have been interested to have taken care of Brad for you.”

“I don’t want to get my hopes up too much.”

“Take it one day at a time, Mika. You never know what could happen. Just don’t do anything to blow it.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You know what I mean. Don’t push Trent away.”

“I’d be crazy to do that.”

“Then you should be fine. I’m going to hang up now. Having to call long distance to talk to each other sucks.”

I groaned. “Tell me about it. I’ll email you tomorrow, and you’d better email me with details about that boy in your Geography class.”

“Will do. Next time *I’ll* call you. Bye, Mika.”

“Bye, Cathy.”

I hung up the phone and went to boot up my laptop. I checked my emails, then launched my internet browser. I pulled up my favorite search engine and typed in Okanagan Indian Band. I knew Trent and his family were members of the Okanagan Indian Band, and that they didn’t live on the reservation. After the time I spent with Trent today I wanted to learn more about his culture.

It turned out that the Okanagan Indian Band had their own website. I figured that had to be the best website to go to. I clicked on the link and spent some time going through the site. It had more than enough information to satisfy my curiosity. I learned that the Okanagan Indian Band was just one of seven Indian Bands that made up the Okanagan Nation. The other six comprised of the Lower Similkameen Indian Band, Upper Similkameen Indian Band, Osoyoos Indian Band, Penticton Indian Band, Westbank First Nation and the Upper Nicola Indian Band. Trent’s band was situated at the head of Okanagan Lake here in Vernon.

I went back to the search engine page. I skimmed down the page where something caught my eye. The word Okanagan had picked up something else other than what I had been searching for. I clicked on the link. The web page was about the one sighting of a black cougar that had taken place several years ago in North Okanagan. There didn’t seem to be much information, but one section stated that the black cougar in British Columbia could very well be nothing more than a

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myth. Being a lover of all big cats, I would have loved to be able to actually see the elusive black cougar out in the wild. But the chances of that happening were very slim. I'm not much of an outdoors person, and I highly doubted I'd ever see a black cougar in Vernon anytime soon.

* * * *

The next morning I closed my locker and then started with surprise when I found Trent standing on the other side of it. I hadn't heard him come up.

I put my hand on my chest. "Thanks for giving me a heart attack so early in the morning."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." Trent gave me a crooked smile. "I thought we could walk to Math together."

I smiled back. "Okay."

As we walked side by side down the hall, I tried to get rid of the goofy smile I just knew had to be on my face. Of course I failed miserably. I couldn't describe how pleased I felt that Trent had sought me out to walk to class with. I also told myself not to read too much into it. There could be a good possibility Trent just wanted to be nothing more than friends. It could be all one-sided on my part.

Trent took hold of my upper arm and pulled me to a stop. At the questioning look I gave him, he said in a low voice, "Don't look now, but Silvia is headed this way. I just had an idea. Do you want to get back at her for all the times she's bothered you?"

I glanced down the hall. Sure enough, Silvia and her group of friends were walking toward us. "Sure. What do you

have in mind?"

"Nothing you can't handle. Just follow my lead, okay?"

I nodded, then my breath left my lungs in a whoosh as Trent slung his arm across my shoulders and pulled me up against his side.

"Put your arm around my waist. Quick!" he whispered.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing—what I was doing. My arm snaked around his waist almost as though I wasn't in control of it. At this point my brain stopped functioning. Everything and everybody suddenly ceased to exist. My entire being centered on Trent and how it felt to be this close to him. Pressed to his side, I felt the heat that came off his body soak into mine. Each breath I took, I filled my lungs with the musky clean scent that was all his own. Trent also seemed taller now that he had me tucked under his arm. The top of my head just barely reached his shoulder.

Out of the side of his mouth, Trent said, "Try and act natural, Mika. She just spotted us."

"Who? Oh, Silvia. Right." How he expected me to act like myself let alone have the capacity to walk without tripping over my feet, I had no idea.

Just as Silvia passed us, Trent yanked me even closer. My gaze shot over to Silvia's face. Her lips were pressed into a thin, angry line as she gave both Trent and me a scathing look. I swore I heard her teeth grind together as she walked by.

Trent chuckled. "I don't think I've seen Silvia that angry before."

"Your plan definitely seemed to work." I tried to take my

arm from around his waist, but Trent didn't allow it. He pulled my arm back where it had been. I looked up at him. "Silvia's gone, you know."

He looked down at me. "I know."

"You do realize the more people that see us walking like this, the more they'll think we're together."

The crooked smile I now associated with Trent appeared on his lips. "Together?"

I felt my face go red. "You know, 'together' as in 'going out.'" When he didn't say anything in return, I added, "As in 'boyfriend and girlfriend.'" His crooked smile broadened. I suddenly got the feeling he knew perfectly well what I'd meant in the first place and had only waited for me to say the words out loud.

"Would that bother you, Mika? If they thought we were a couple."

"No...no."

"Good, because it doesn't bother me."

Trent kept me held against his side all the way to home-room and didn't let go until we came to my desk. As Trent sat in the desk across from mine, I heard some loud whispering from the back of the classroom. I knew by lunch most of the school would have heard about Trent and me. That didn't bother me. But it did make me wonder if Trent only did it to piss Silvia off, or if he really *did* like me in that way.

Chapter 5

After the bell rang at the end of the period, Trent left the classroom at my side. We didn't get much time to talk during class. The teacher had decided to surprise us with a short quiz to see how much Math we'd remembered from last year. I, of course, found the quiz a bit on the hard side, unlike Trent who finished his a good ten minutes before I did.

Outside in the hallway I turned to Trent. "I guess I'll see you at lunch then."

Trent took a step closer and leaned in slightly. "I'll save a table for us."

I held my breath as he stared intently into my eyes. He seemed to lean in even closer. I thought at first he was about to kiss me right there in the hall for everyone to see, but he only reached up and tucked my hair behind my ear. He then straightened to his full height and left for his next class. I released the breath I'd been holding in a rush, before I too headed for my class.

The time seemed to drag. I couldn't wait for lunch to get

here so I could see Trent again. During the last half of English the teacher gave us time to start reading the chapters assigned for us to finish by tomorrow. I'd just started to read when I felt someone poke me in the back. I turned half-way around in my chair to see who sat behind me. I groaned to myself when I saw it was one of Silvia's friends, Rachel.

Rachel whispered. "So, how did you manage it, loser?"

Through gritted teeth, I whispered back, "How did I manage what?"

"How did you manage to land Trent as a boyfriend? I thought he had better taste than that."

I chose to ignore Rachel and turned back around. I wasn't about to get sucked into that discussion. But that didn't seem to put Rachel off any.

To my back, she said, "Silvia won't let you get away with this, you know. Trent's hers, everyone knows that. So don't expect to hang onto him for too long."

Mr. Brown, the English teacher, loudly cleared his throat. "Mika, Rachel, if you two aren't discussing the assigned chapters I suggest you wait until after class to talk to one another."

I ducked my head and focused my attention on the book open on my desk. Just what I needed. Now apparently I'd have one of Silvia's minions harassing me as well. I had to be thankful that I didn't have any more of her friends in my other classes.

I escaped English as soon as the bell rang. I didn't want Rachel cornering me. It only took me a few minutes to reach

the cafeteria. I smiled when I spotted Trent at the same table we'd used the day before. He returned my smile as I crossed the cafeteria and sat down in the chair across from him.

"I see you managed to get our table again," I said as I pulled my lunch out of my backpack.

"I figured you'd want to sit here."

I noticed Trent didn't have any lunch of his own again.

"Did you eat already?"

"Yeah."

I pushed my baggie full of crackers across the table. "You can help yourself if you want."

Trent pushed them back. "You don't have to feed me, Mika. I already ate, remember."

"I know, but I feel bad that I have to eat in front of you when you aren't."

"Relax, Mika." Trent chuckled. "Eat your lunch. If it'll make you feel any better I won't eat during my spare. Will that make you happy?"

"Don't feel as if you have to do that just for me."

"I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable."

I took a bite of my sandwich and pushed the crackers over to Trent once again. He shook his head, but this time he opened the baggie and took some of the crackers.

"No romance novel today?" Trent asked just before he popped a cracker in his mouth.

It was in my backpack. I'd brought it just in case Trent hadn't ended up eating with me, but I wasn't about to tell him that. "It would be kinda rude on my part if I started to

read with you sitting here.”

Trent winked. “It could be fun if you read it to me instead.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “Yeah, right. I’m sorry, but I’m not reading from a romance novel out loud, especially to you.”

“Why? Would you get embarrassed?”

“Yeah.”

I happened to look over Trent’s shoulder and caught sight of Silvia. She sat a couple of tables away with her friends. Both she and Rachel sat together as they looked in my direction with scowls on their faces. When they noticed I looked their way, Rachel mouthed the word loser as she held her index finger and thumb in front of her forehead in the shape of an L. I jerked my gaze away and found Trent watching me.

“What’s the matter?”

I gave him a small smile. “Nothing.”

He didn’t seem reassured. He turned in his seat to look behind him. When he spotted Silvia and her crew, he made a small sound under his breath that I swore sounded like a cat’s growl. “What did Silvia do this time?”

“It wasn’t Silvia, it was Rachel. Don’t worry about it, Trent. It’s nothing. Really.”

I glanced over in Silvia’s direction again and saw she’d gotten up. With a large smile on her face, she walked over to our table. If I’d been alone, I would have left the cafeteria. I didn’t need any of her harassment today.

Silvia came to stand next to Trent's chair. She continued to smile as she stared down at him. "Why don't you come and sit with me, Trent? I'm sure I'm much better company than the freak here. You don't have to lower yourself to her standards."

Trent made that very soft growling sound again. If Silvia heard it, she didn't act as if she had. She continued to smile.

"Now, Silvia, why would I go and sit with you when Mika wouldn't bore me to death with stupid girl talk like you would. I think I'd be lowering my standards to sit at your table since you only have half the brain Mika does."

At hearing Trent's words I choked back a laugh, which made Silvia glare at me with anger flashing in her eyes.

"What are you laughing at, loser? You think that's funny, do you? At least I can make friends, unlike you. And I don't dress like I got my clothes at a second-hand store." With that, Silvia flounced back to her table.

No longer hungry, I stuffed my half-eaten sandwich back into my lunch bag. I avoided looking at Trent. Today I hadn't taken as much care as I had the day before when I picked my clothes. I'd thought I would at least be able to stay under Silvia's radar if I dressed as I normally did. I guessed wrong. I couldn't win for losing. As I shoved my lunch bag inside my backpack and zipped it up I sensed Silvia watching me. I couldn't stay in the cafeteria any longer.

I started to stand, but stopped short when I saw Trent standing next to my chair with his hand held out. Either I'd been too busy feeling sorry for myself to have heard him get

out of his chair, or Trent had been able to move without making a sound. I gazed up and put my hand in his. He pulled me up on my feet and laced his fingers through mine.

“Let’s get out of here, Mika.” He turned to give Silvia a nasty look before he started to lead me out of the cafeteria.

Trent didn’t say anything more as we walked hand in hand down the hall and outside. The glare from the bright sunshine blinded me for a couple of seconds before my eyes adjusted. Trent led me to one of the school’s big trees, which he sat under in the shade. He pulled me down to sit next to him and kept my hand in his. His thumb gently stroked the back of my hand.

He sighed. “I’m sorry, Mika.”

I turned my head to look at him. “What are you sorry for? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I should never have looked over at Silvia. I only asked for trouble when I did.”

I shook my head. “It wasn’t your fault. I had a feeling I wouldn’t escape unscathed today. Rachel already had a few nasty things to say to me in English. I should have expected Silvia to do something.”

Trent turned to look me in the face. “What did Rachel say?”

I waved his question away with a flick of my hand. “Don’t worry about it.”

He pulled me closer to his side and rested our clasped hands on his thigh. “Would you stop being the martyr? I know you don’t want to stand up to Silvia and her friends. That’s

fine, but I won't let them be nasty to you and not get something nasty back in return. I know what it's like to be picked on just because you aren't like them."

"As if you've ever been picked on," I said in a droll voice.

Trent didn't give me his crooked smile like I expected. His face stayed stern. "As a matter of fact I have."

I had a hard time believing that. "When? I know for sure no one would dare pick on you now." Given Trent's height and muscle mass, the other boys in school tended to keep their distance from him.

"Back when my family used to live on the reservation, when I was younger."

"Oh." I sometimes forgot Trent hadn't always lived off the reservation. It hadn't been until he had started grade eight that Trent and his family had moved. That bit of information had come from Cathy. She'd dug it up when I'd first started to show interest in Trent two years before.

"Silvia's basically a bully. Knock her down a few times and she'll back off. So what did Rachel say?"

I turned to look up at the clear blue sky. "She asked me how I managed to land you as my boyfriend. I ignored her of course, which just pissed her off. She managed to get one last jab in though. She told me I wouldn't have you for long, and that Silvia would take you away from me soon."

Trent snorted. "As if that would happen. I can't stand Silvia." He reached over and turned my head in his direction. "I'm not going anywhere, Mika. So don't let them get to you. Okay?"

I smiled. "Okay. I still say you're my knight in shining armor."

Trent rolled his eyes at that. "I better watch myself or pretty soon you'll be comparing me to one of the heroes in those romance novels you read."

I cocked a brow at him. "And just how exactly would you know what a hero in a romance novel would be like?"

Trent actually blushed. "My Mom's hooked on those things. I got curious a couple years ago. So I swiped one of her books and read one."

I bit back a smile. "Which one did you read?"

He shook his head. "I don't remember. It wasn't as if I read the whole book. I read about half of it then I gave up. Romance novels aren't what I'd call my favorite thing to read."

I burst out laughing at the disgusted look Trent wore on his face. "Well, they *are* written for women, you know. Personally, I think a guy should read at least one romance novel in his lifetime."

"Why would you think that?"

"For one thing, maybe they would learn something from it about what women really want when it comes to romance."

"Really now?" Trent released my hand, then turned toward me and roughly pulled me up against his chest. "So if I were to hold you like this and look deeply into your eyes as I slowly lowered my lips to yours, you would like it?"

My heart thumped so hard against my ribs I had to wonder if Trent felt it against his chest. I lost the ability to speak

as I looked up into his brown eyes. The crooked grin that had been on his face slowly slipped away as he continued to look down at me. All of a sudden he grew stiff. For a split second I thought his eyes appeared to lighten to gold, but it happened so fast I didn't know if it was just my mind playing tricks on me.

Trent's nostrils flared as he drew in a deep breath, then he slowly let go. He moved a little away so our bodies didn't touch. "I'm going to take that as a 'yes.'"

I nodded, still unable to speak.

He cleared his throat. "I guess we'd better get back inside. The bell's going to ring soon. I need to go to my locker before the next period, but I'll walk you to yours just in case you run into Silvia again."

I nodded again. Picking up my backpack, I stood and brushed the grass off the back of my jeans. Trent walked beside me, but this time he didn't try to take my hand. I figured with Silvia and her crew not around to see he didn't think it necessary.

We didn't pass too many other kids as we walked to my locker. Once there I turned to face Trent. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow in Math."

Trent nodded. "And I'll save us a table at lunch again."

I studied his face. There seemed to be a strained look to it. "Are you sure?"

His brows drew together. "Why wouldn't I want to?"

"I don't know. Right now I'm getting the impression you really don't want to be around me. I'll totally understand if

you don't want to be."

In a blink of an eye, Trent had me backed against my closed locker as he put his hands on either side of my head, effectively caging me in. He shook his head. "That is about the farthest thing from the truth, Mika. If anything, I want to be around you more than would be good for you. I'll see you tomorrow." He gently caressed my cheek with the tips of his fingers before he walked away.

I watched him until he disappeared down the hall. My heart raced inside my chest. Trent had just about turned my brain to mush with just a simple touch to my cheek. *What'll happen if he actually kisses me one day?*

Chapter 6

I rushed home and up to my bedroom after school. I didn't even bother to stop and say hello to Mom before I went upstairs. I just yelled that I was home as I took the stairs two at a time.

I spent the next two hours chatting with Cathy on instant messenger as we talked about my time spent with Trent. Cathy took it all as a good sign that he'd eventually ask me out. A part of me hoped that he would, but I tried not to get my hopes up too much. Cathy on the other hand, believed a hundred per cent that it would only be a matter of time before he did.

During dinner I spent more time replaying the episode that had taken place under the tree at school than I did on the food on my plate. Mom gave me a knowing smile every time she caught my eye. Luckily for me, neither Dad nor Jared seemed to notice. I knew if Jared ever found out about Trent he'd never let me live it down. Little brothers can be pains in the butt that way.

With dinner over, I sat up in my room as I worked on my homework. I didn't bother to look up from my books where I sat on my bed when a knock came on my bedroom door. "If you aren't Jared, you can come in."

Dad pushed open the door. He stepped into my room and closed it softly behind him. I sat up straighter on my bed and waited for him to speak. He leaned back against the closed door and silently stared. From past experience, I knew he was thinking through what he wanted to say. He only did this when he wanted to discuss something he considered demanded more of his attention than other things. His blue eyes, so much like my own, searched my face. I silently waited for him to collect his thoughts.

A few seconds later, he cleared his throat. "Your mother told me you're interested in a boy."

I groaned. "Do we have to get into this, Dad?"

"I think so. Your mother seems to think you have gotten closer to this boy. She said you were pretty distracted over dinner, and she figured it had to do with this boy. She's always more observant about these things than I am."

That was true. Dad's an IT specialist. If something didn't have to do with computers or the internet, he tended to miss what was going on around him. "Stop calling him 'this boy.' His name's Trent."

"Trent what?"

"Trent Hunter. And you don't have anything to worry about, Dad. We're just friends."

"That doesn't mean it'll stay that way. Your mother and I

started out just as friends too.”

Mom and Dad had been high school sweethearts. To this day, I sometimes catch them making goo goo eyes at each other. “So what’s this all about, Dad?”

He moved away from the door and came to sit on the edge of my bed. “Well, I just thought that if Trent decided to ask you out on a date I’d like to meet him first.”

I groaned again. “Dad! Do you have to be so much the dad when it comes to the subject of me dating?”

He smiled. “It *is* my job, don’t you know? And you *are* my only daughter. It’s kind of hard for me to accept that my daughter wants to go out on dates.”

“I suggest you get over it. It’ll happen someday. I can’t believe we’re having this conversation when I haven’t even been asked out on a date, ever.”

“I just thought to discuss this with you now so you know where I stand about the whole dating thing.”

“Fine. If Trent ever asks me out, and I’m not sure that he will, I’ll have him come over here first so you can check him out. Is that okay with you?”

Dad smiled. “That’s fine with me.” He got up and walked to my door. Before he opened it, he turned back to face me. “How are things at school? Is that girl still giving you problems?”

I shrugged. “A little, but nothing I can’t handle.”

“Do you want me to call the school and discuss it with your vice principal?”

“Please, god, no. That’ll just make things worse. Besides,

Trent has been helping me with that.”

“I guess he can’t be all that bad then. I’ll leave you to finish your homework. Just remember, if that girl starts to get out of hand I’m more than willing to go to the school about it. You don’t have to feel as if you have to take her abuse, Mika.”

“I know, Dad.”

Once Dad left me alone I shook my head. It would seem Mom was way more observant than I thought. And of course she would’ve told Dad about her suspicions. Mom would never keep anything from him. To be honest, when the time came, I hoped I could be just as close to my husband as my parents were to each other.

I turned my attention back to my homework. I’d been working on my Math before Dad had come in to talk. It was slow going. It made me wish Trent was there to help me. It also gave me an idea. Maybe I could ask Trent to come to my house to help me with my Math. The only problem would be whether or not I could get over my shyness enough to ask him. I felt more comfortable around him now, but asking him over to my place seemed like a big step for me to take. If he said yes, it would appease my father, but if he said no, I would kick myself for even daring to ask. I’d have to wait and see how Trent acted tomorrow. And whether or not I could screw up enough courage to ask him.

* * * *

Much to my pleasure, Trent met me at my locker the next morning. He seemed to be back to his old self. He

flashed his crooked smile as soon as he saw me. The stiffness and uneasiness he'd shown the day before seemed to have disappeared. He even held my hand as we walked to our home-room together. I at first thought that maybe Trent *did* like me in that way. But when I saw that we'd have to walk by Silvia and her crew, I let that thought disappear.

Through most of the class I debated with myself about asking Trent to come and help me with my Math. I didn't want to ask him and have him outright turn me down, but if I didn't at least try I knew I'd kick myself later for being such a coward. *Decisions, decisions.* In the end I decided to just go for it.

Since we were supposed to be quietly working on our assigned Math work, I leaned over to the very edge of my desk toward Trent who sat in the desk beside mine. "Pssst."

Trent's head came up as he turned and look in my direction. He whispered, "What?"

I kept my voice to a hush. "I was wondering...if you don't have anything to do this weekend...would you mind coming to my place to help me with my Math." I felt my face turn beet red as I talked. By the time I'd forced the last words out of my mouth I knew my whole face had to be flushed.

"You want me to help you with your Math?"

I nodded. I didn't think I could force another word out until he said 'yes' or 'no.'

Trent slowly nodded and whispered back, "Yeah. I could do that. I don't have anything really planned for this weekend. Would tomorrow afternoon be okay with you?"

I let go of the breath I'd been holding. "That would be fine. I'll be home all day so come by whenever you want."

"Sounds good."

The bell rang and I collected up my books. Trent waited for me to put them in my backpack. Once out in the hall, I told him I'd see him at lunch. He nodded, then left to go to his next class.

I just barely managed to hold back the shout of joy threatening to break free. I'd conquered my shyness and done what I thought I wouldn't be able to. It had turned out to be less painful than I thought. Would I have been able to ask another boy to my house? I doubted it. Only with Trent did I feel less shy.

When lunch period finally arrived, I hurried to meet Trent in the cafeteria. He sat at our table waiting. As he'd said yesterday, he waited to eat his lunch with me. I pulled my lunch bag out of my backpack as I looked over at what Trent pulled out of his. He had two thick sandwiches, a baggie of cookies, a baggie of crackers, an apple, and a juice box.

I looked up at Trent and asked, "Are you sure you can eat all that food?"

He grabbed one of the sandwiches and opened the baggie. "Of course. This should tide me over until I can get home after school."

My eyes widened. "If I ate like that I'd be the size of a house."

Trent chuckled. "I have a fast metabolism, I guess. I always eat this way. My Mom's always complaining that I'm

eating up the food as fast as she can get it into the house.”

“Not fair. I guess if I started lifting weights like you I’d be able to get away with eating more.”

“That does help. Maybe that’s something we could do on Sunday. You could come over to my house and I could teach you how to lift weights.”

I sucked in a breath of surprise at Trent’s offer. “Really? You’d do that for me?”

“Sure. You’ll be surprised by how fast you can build up your muscles. Maybe you’ll get enough that if Silvia becomes too much of a pain you could pop her one.”

I giggled. “Now that would be incentive enough for me to want to start weight training. Sure, why not? Who knows, if I get big enough muscles, Silvia’ll become too scared to cross me.”

Even though I really hadn’t had much ambition to ever get into weight training, the prospect of having Trent as my trainer put it all in a whole new light. There was no way I’d turn that offer down, especially since it meant I could spend more time with him.

“Then it’s a deal.” Trent held his hand out for me to shake.

I put my hand in his and we shook. He held my hand a second longer than was necessary before he released it and picked up his sandwich again. This day only seemed to get better and better.

I watched Trent consume every bit of food he had brought. When I couldn’t finish the last of my cookies, I

handed them over to him, and he quickly ate them. I had a feeling he probably still had room in his stomach for more if I had it to give. Trent was an eating machine. I hoped my brother didn't start eating like Trent when he reached his age. I'd be lucky to get *any* food if he did.

We spent the rest of the lunch period in the cafeteria. Silvia didn't come to bug us, which was a plus. I caught her watching us from time to time, but she mostly seemed to be doing her best to ignore Trent and me. I didn't mind. If only she could be that well behaved everyday.

Trent walked me to my locker a few minutes before the bell rang. I then remembered I hadn't given him my home address. I stopped him before he could walk away. "Wait, Trent. You don't have my address. Let me write it down for you."

He smiled. "I guess that would help. It will also save me from having to call every Taylor in the phonebook trying to find it."

I grimaced. "That would be a time-consuming job. There are like a ton of Taylors in the phonebook. I'll give you my phone number as well just in case something comes up and you can't come over."

I quickly tore a blank piece of lined paper out of one of my binders and wrote down my address and phone number. I then handed it to Trent. He folded it and stuck it in the front pocket of his jeans.

"Thanks, Mika. I'll see you tomorrow."

He leaned in and kissed my cheek before he walked

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away. I stared after him, sure my mouth hung open. I still felt where his lips had pressed against the skin of my cheek. After Trent turned a corner and was no longer in my line of sight, I closed my mouth with a snap before I turned to go to my next class. I stiffened when I saw Silvia standing a few feet away. Now I knew why Trent had kissed me. I hadn't known Silvia stood so close by, but Trent had obviously been able to see her.

I didn't look at Silvia as I walked by. I had to stop reading so much into how Trent acted. He'd never outright said he liked me in that way. The hand-holding and the kiss could have been just for Silvia's benefit. I hoped not, because if I wasn't careful I could be the one getting hurt in the end.

Chapter 7

Saturday I woke up earlier than I usually did. The weekends I tend to sleep in late since the rest of the week I have to get up so early for school. Today I thought it wouldn't be a good idea to laze about in bed. For starters, I expected Trent to come over and I wanted to make sure I at least didn't look as if I'd just rolled out of bed. I didn't really know what time to expect him, but I figured it would be some time after noon. So at ten o'clock I dragged myself out of bed and hopped into the shower. I even took the extra time to blow dry my hair instead of allowing it to air dry as I normally do.

As I walked by my brother's open bedroom door on my way downstairs, Jared appeared in the doorway and started to make kissy noises at me. He already knew about Trent coming over since I'd told my parents about our plans during dinner the night before.

I scowled at Jared. "Would you grow up already?"

"Are you going to kiss your boyfriend when he gets here, Mika?" Jared made more kissy noises.

"Trent isn't my boyfriend. And it isn't any of your business if I kiss him or not."

"He may not be your boyfriend, but you wish he was."

"Get lost, Jared." I moved to stand in front of him and stared down, thankful he hadn't grown taller than me yet. "When Trent gets here I want you to disappear. Got it? If you hang around to bother us I'll make you pay."

"I live here too. I can go wherever I want and you can't stop me."

"You wanna bet? I'm giving you fair warning, Jared. If you do anything to embarrass me around Trent, don't be surprised if you find I've taken a magnet to all your video games."

"You wouldn't."

"Just watch me."

I gave Jared a hard stare to let him know I meant every word I said. He backed up and slammed his bedroom door in my face. I smiled to myself as I headed down the stairs. That threat hopefully should keep Jared away. At least I hoped.

Both Mom and Dad were sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee when I arrived downstairs. I grabbed a bowl and a box of cereal out of the cupboard before I sat down at the table with them. Mom got up and took the milk out of the fridge for me and took a spoon out of one of the drawers.

When she sat back down she said, "So today's the big day, huh?"

I poured some cereal and milk into my bowl. I nodded. "Yeah." I put a spoonful of cereal into my mouth and chewed.

“Well if Trent’s the reason why you’re out of bed before noon on a Saturday, he’s welcome to come over every Saturday,” Dad said with a chuckle.

I swallowed my food. “Ha ha, Dad. I don’t know when he’s going to show up so I decided I better get up earlier.”

“It got you out of bed when it’s still morning.”

Mom playfully jabbed Dad in the ribs. “Don’t listen to him, Mika. So where do you want to work with Trent?”

“I thought we could work at the dining room table. If that’s okay with you?”

“That’s fine. I’ll make sure it’s cleared of your father’s junk.”

“Hey,” Dad said. “It isn’t junk.”

Mom shook her head and turned to look at Dad. “It may not be junk to you, but if it’s sitting on my dining room table collecting dust, it’s junk to me.” She then turned in my direction. “I’ll keep Jared away as long as Trent’s here.”

“Thanks, Mom. I already threatened him with dire consequences if he bothered us.”

“Hopefully between the two of us, Jared’ll keep to himself. I guess I’d better go upstairs and have a little talk with your brother now before Trent gets here.”

After Mom left the kitchen, Dad got up and headed for the dining room. I soon heard him collecting his things from the dining room table as he muttered to himself about none of it being junk. I finished my cereal and put my bowl in the dishwasher before I headed back upstairs to collect my Math books.

Dad was nowhere in sight when I came back downstairs. I placed my Math textbook and binder on the dining room table. I placed them so I'd have to sit at the end of the table, but then I thought that may not be such a good idea. If I sat at the end of the table, Trent would have to sit at one of the chairs at the side of the table closest to where I sat. He'd have to look at my work on an angle. I shifted my books to one of the places at the side of the table. That way Trent and I could sit in the two chairs there side by side to work.

But what if Trent doesn't want to sit that close? When we sat together in the cafeteria at school, he always sat across from me. I didn't want to make him uncomfortable. I slid the books back to where I'd originally put them. But then I thought about his having to turn his head on an angle to better see my books. I didn't want him to end up with a sore neck because of it. I quickly moved the books back to the side of the table before I changed my mind once again. I forced myself to back away from the dining room table. I was obviously over-thinking things. Before I walked out of the room, I decided I'd let Trent sit down first. If he chose to sit at the end of the table, then I'd know he didn't want to sit beside me. I headed back up to my bedroom to wait before I started to drive myself crazy over stupid little things.

* * * *

At one o'clock sharp the doorbell rang. I rushed to the front door to answer it before anybody else. I yanked open the door and smiled at Trent. "You made it."

Trent returned my smile. "It wasn't too hard to find your

place.”

“That’s good.” I let my gaze run up and down him. He wore his usual t-shirt and jeans with his hair loose around his shoulders. It made my fingers itch to run them through it. I liked it better when it wasn’t pulled back in a ponytail.

“Are you going to let me inside or are we going to work on your Math outside here on the porch?” Trent asked with a laugh.

I quickly stepped back and waved him inside. “Sorry. Come in. I figured we could work at the dining room table.” I closed the front door behind Trent once he stepped inside.

“Sounds good.”

I watched him wipe his running shoes on the mat. I then noticed he didn’t have any books with him. “Don’t you have any Math to work on as well?”

He shook his head. “I finished it all before the end of class yesterday.”

“Oh. I thought *you’d* have Math homework to finish up as well.”

“I don’t mind helping you.”

“Are you sure you won’t get bored?”

Trent flashed his crooked grin. “How could I be bored when I’m around you?”

I felt my face grow flush in response. Before I could say anything else, Jared came bounding down the stairs. He drew up short when he caught sight of Trent.

“Whoa,” he said as he craned his neck to look up at Trent.

“Jared, I told you to get lost. Remember what I said would happen. Magnet. Video games.”

“I’m leaving. Don’t you dare go near my games.”

At that moment Mom arrived. She gave Jared a stern look and pointed up in the direction of the stairs. “Leave your sister and her friend alone. Go back upstairs and make yourself scarce for a while.” Once Jared headed off, she turned to face Trent and me. She smiled at Trent. “I’m Mika’s Mom. It’s nice to finally meet you, Trent.”

“Thanks for letting me come over, Mrs. Taylor.”

Mom winked at me before she said, “You’re perfectly welcome to come over any time, especially if you’re willing to help Mika with her Math. I’m afraid she gets that from me. I never did great at Math when I went to school either. I guess I’ll leave you two alone to get at it. I’ll make sure Jared doesn’t bother you.”

Mom started up the stairs as I led Trent to the dining room. “I’m going to apologize ahead of time just in case my brother does anything stupid while you’re here.”

Trent chuckled. “Don’t worry about it. How old is he?”

“Twelve. I’m dreading the fact that he’ll be going to Vernon next year. Thank goodness I’ll only have to put up with him for the one year.”

“What? You’re not looking forward to having your little brother in the same school?”

I gave Trent a look that said he must be crazy to even think it. “Ah, no. Jared can be a major pain in the butt.”

“At least you have a younger brother. At times I wish I

had a younger brother or sister.”

“Well, you are welcome to take mine any time you want. I’m sure he’ll cure you of wanting a younger sibling in no time.”

When we reached the dining room table I motioned for Trent to sit. He sat down in the chair at the side of the table closest to the end. He then pulled my books over to him and pulled the chair next to his out for me. I smiled to myself and moved to sit beside him. Trent moved the Math textbook so it sat on the table between us and flipped it open to our assigned homework. I opened my binder to a blank piece of lined paper and listened as he explained how to do the work.

Part way through, Dad came into the dining room and introduced himself to Trent. Dad gave Trent the once over as he asked him a few questions about himself. Trent must have passed the test, because after that Dad asked him if he owned a computer and what type he had. I knew if I didn’t stop him before he really got on the topic of computers, Dad would never leave.

I interrupted Dad in mid-sentence as I loudly cleared my throat. “I’m sure you can discuss computers with Trent another time, Dad. Right now he’s supposed to be helping me with my Math.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry about that. I’m going. I almost forgot. Your Mom wants me to run to the grocery store for a few things. Do you need anything while I’m out?”

I shook my head. “Nope. I’m fine.”

“All right then. I’m off.”

Once Dad walked away I sent Mom a silent “thank you.” I knew she’d sent Dad to the store as an excuse to get him out of the house for a while. Dad meant well, but I knew it would take him some time to adjust to the whole business of me having a boy over to the house for the first time.

A half hour later, I closed the Math textbook with a snap. I was now all caught up on my homework, and surprisingly now understood what the heck I was doing too. I closed my binder and turned in my chair to face Trent. “Thanks. I’ve learned more from you than I have from Mr. Morrison. Maybe you should consider becoming a teacher.”

Trent chuckled and shook his head. “No thanks. I don’t mind working one on one with you, but having to stand up in front of a classroom full of kids everyday has no appeal for me.”

I smiled. “Yeah, having to deal with a bunch of teenagers day after day may not be so much fun.” I pushed back my chair. “Are you hungry? I’m sure my Mom has something in the kitchen to snack on.”

“Sure. I could use a top up.”

I took Trent out to the kitchen. Mom wasn’t around, but I knew she’d baked some muffins earlier. I took the large plastic container Mom had stored the muffins in to the kitchen table and took off the lid. “How does a blueberry muffin sound?” I pushed the container over to Trent who stood next to me.

“They smell delicious. I thought I smelled fresh-baked muffins when I came in.”

I took a muffin as well and motioned for Trent to sit down as I sat down on the chair next to his. "My Mom made these a couple of hours before you arrived. You must have a good sense of smell."

Trent appeared to stiffen slightly at my comment. "Yeah, I guess I do." He took a big bite of his muffin and gave me the thumbs-up sign.

As we ate in silence, Mom came into the kitchen before we finished our muffins. With a smile, she took a second muffin out of the container and placed it in front of Trent. "Have another one. I made them mostly for you and Mika. I know teenage boys are bottomless pits. I'm just waiting for Jared to start eating me out of house and home."

Trent swallowed the last bite of his first muffin. "Thanks, Mrs. Taylor. These are really good."

"You're very welcome, Trent. I'm glad you like them." Mom then turned to me. "Mika, why don't you take Trent outside in the backyard for a bit? I don't think I can keep Jared corralled in his bedroom for too much longer."

I nodded. "Okay. We'll go out once Trent finishes his muffin."

Mom left the kitchen. I heard her head back upstairs, probably to tell Jared he could come downstairs soon. I watched Trent practically inhale his second muffin. Just as he popped the last piece in his mouth, he cocked his head as if he heard something. I didn't hear anything.

Trent stood up and held his hand out. "I can hear your brother coming. Shall we escape to the backyard before he

gets here?”

I still didn't hear anything, but then I heard the one squeaky stair step we have let out a quiet squeak as if someone was trying to sneak down the stairs. If the stair hadn't squeaked I would never have known Jared had been trying to sneak up on us. With a nod I took hold of Trent's hand and let him pull me out of my chair. We just barely managed to get outside before Jared arrived in the kitchen.

Chapter 8

We have a fair-sized backyard. When Jared and I were younger it had been our playground. Dad had gone all out and bought a big metal swing set with a slide for us to play on. He also built a tree fort in the large maple tree at the far end of the backyard. For a computer geek, Dad can be pretty handy at building things.

Once we were outside, I led Trent over to the tree fort. Neither Jared nor I had been inside it for the last couple of years. I figured it would be one place Jared wouldn't think I would go.

Trent looked up at the tree fort. "Do you think we can both fit up there?"

I looked Trent up and down and then bit my bottom lip. "Hmm, I think so. You *are* pretty big though. It may be a tight squeeze with the two of us. To be honest, I haven't been up in the fort for a long time. Now that I'm really looking at it, it does look smaller than I remembered."

"Well, the only way to find out is to go up there and try.

You go first.”

I moved and put my hands on one of the pieces of wood that had been nailed up the tree’s trunk for hand and foot holds. “All right. If I start to fall, promise you’ll catch me. Knowing my luck, I’ll fall and break an arm or something.”

Trent moved up behind me. “I’ll catch you. Broken bones aren’t allowed today.”

I slowly started the climb up to the fort. Trent followed close behind. A couple of the pieces of wood creaked ominously when I put my weight on them, but they held in place. Once I made it inside the fort, I moved to the farthest side to make room for Trent. He managed to squeeze his large frame inside.

“I guess I’m a bit too big for this,” Trent said as he shifted around to sit in a more comfortable position.

I sat with my legs crossed in front of me to give Trent more room for his much longer ones. “We don’t have to stay up here too long. I thought this would be a good place to get away from Jared for a while.”

“It’s okay.”

I peeked through the open space in the fort’s wall at the house. I could see Jared standing inside the house at the glass sliding door looking for us. I shook my head. “Speak of the devil. He’s trying to see where we are right now.”

Trent shifted closer and looked out the opening. He laughed. “He doesn’t seem to give up easily.”

“He just doesn’t know when to quit. He used to drive Cathy and me nuts. Whenever she’d come over Jared would

be around like a dirty old sock trying to hear what we said to each other. I hope he outgrows it.”

“I’m sure he will. Just think, when he starts bringing girls home you can return the favor. You can tell them all about his nasty little habits.”

I smiled. “That’s not a bad idea.”

Sitting back, I leaned against the opposite wall. I sat forward again when what felt like a couple of nail heads dug into my back. I tried to lean back once again, but I couldn’t find a comfortable spot. Trent looked over, then wrapped his arm around my shoulders and shifted me so I leaned back against his chest. As he held me to him, he silently played with the ends of my hair, wrapping it around his fingers.

The silence stretched between us. It wasn’t an uncomfortable silence by any means. I would’ve been quite content to sit with Trent’s arm around me for the rest of the day if he’d let me. I let my head fall back to rest against his broad shoulder. With the heat coming off his body while he played with my hair, I felt myself relax. I probably would have fallen asleep at some point, but Trent gave me a small nudge with his shoulder.

“Mika?”

“Yeah?”

“You aren’t going to sleep on me, are you?”

I turned my head to look up at him and gave him a small smile. “Not right now I’m not. All I have to say is that you throw enough body heat it wouldn’t be too hard to do.”

“That’s me, your own personal furnace. So are we still

on for tomorrow?"

I nodded. "Sure. What time do you want me to come over? And you'll have to give me your address before you go today."

"How about I pick you up around one in the afternoon? I'm sure I can borrow my Mom's car again."

"I'll be ready then." Trent shifted against me as he adjusted his legs. He really was too big to be comfortable in my small tree fort. "How about we get out of here before your legs fall asleep?"

"I think that would be a good idea. Not that I'm complaining, mind you, but the fort definitely lacks leg room."

Trent let go and waited until I moved a little away before he moved over to the fort's entrance. He turned and only climbed down the tree far enough to give me room to make my descent. I moved over to the edge and looked down. I hadn't realized how high up we actually were until now. The tree had to have grown taller over the last couple of years, because I knew the fort hadn't been this high the last time I had been in it.

"I'm right here, Mika," Trent said as if he sensed my sudden nervousness. "I won't let you fall."

"Okay. I can do this."

I inched closer to the edge as I turned and put my legs over the side. Trent grabbed one of my ankles and put my foot on the piece of wood just under it for support. Once I placed my other foot onto the wood, he lowered himself to the next piece. He then waited for me to take the spot where

he'd been.

With care, I lowered my foot until my toes hit the next piece of wood below the one I stood on. The wood creaked a bit, but I didn't think anything of it. As I went to put my second foot down, the piece of wood came away with a loud snap. Caught off guard, I felt myself start to fall. Unable to grab on hard enough to stop my downward descent, I let out a shriek before I crashed into Trent.

I only had enough time to realize we'd both would end up in a pile at the bottom of the tree. But that didn't happen. Trent hooked one of his arms around my waist, then we seemed to twist in the air for a few seconds before he landed on his feet. He held me with my back to his chest with my feet off the ground.

My heart still raced after such a close call. I turned my head to look back at Trent. "How...how did you do that?"

Trent put me down and let go. "I don't know. I guess I just got lucky."

I shook my head in denial. "No. You landed on your feet as if you just jumped off a small step." I stared at him. "Your eyes!" They no longer were a pure brown, but had lightened to such a light brown they verged on gold.

Before I could say anything more, Trent grabbed me by the upper arms and lowered his lips to mine. My eyes fluttered shut at the sensation. As he kissed me it made thinking impossible. Everything flew out of my head. It now didn't matter that he was able to jump from such a great height and land on his feet like a cat. Nor did I care that his eyes seemed

to change color from one moment to the next.

The kiss had just started to get *really* good when Trent suddenly pulled away. I blinked my eyes open to find him standing with his hands fisted at his sides and his back toward me. I tried to reach out and touch him, but he stepped away before I made contact.

“Trent? Did I do something wrong?” I asked in a soft voice.

He shook his head, but he didn’t turn to look at me. “No. I have to go. I’ll pick you up tomorrow afternoon.” With that said, Trent walked away at a brisk pace.

“See you tomorrow,” I said as he disappeared.

I stayed outside in the backyard until I heard the sound of Trent’s car pulling out of the driveway. Now that he no longer kissed me, I regained my ability to think. I rubbed my hands up and down my arms as my skin broke out in goose bumps, just thinking of what could have happened if Trent hadn’t caught me. Contrary to what he said, that hadn’t been a fluke. Trent had landed lightly on his feet as if he did stuff like that everyday. I couldn’t have done it. If I jumped from that high and landed on my feet I would have broken my leg. The jolt alone would have been enough to knock my teeth together.

I started to walk toward the glass sliding door. As for Trent’s eyes—this time I knew my mind hadn’t played tricks on me. The color change had lasted much longer than the first time I’d seen it happen. I also got the distinct impression that Trent had used the kiss to deliberately distract me. That

didn't bug me. What bugged me was the fact Trent felt he had to try and cover it up. If he had a secret, I'd be the last person who'd go around telling everyone about it. Besides, who'd believe me? No one.

My mind awirl with thoughts, I walked into the house and collected my books from the dining room table. I absentmindedly went upstairs to my room. In the end, I decided I wouldn't say anything more about it to Trent when I saw him tomorrow. If he wanted to tell me, that would be fine, but if he didn't, I wouldn't push him. I didn't want him to push me away because I touched on something he didn't want me to know about.

* * * *

That night I didn't sleep very well. I had the strangest dream. In the dream I was with Trent and we were holding hands as we walked down the school's hallway. We walked past Silvia. She scowled at us. Trent said something and I laughed even though I had no idea what he said. We continued down the hallway. Before we reached our homeroom door, Trent stiffened and made the animalistic growl I heard him make before in the cafeteria. I looked in the direction he stared to see what had caused him to act this way. Brad, the boy I used to like in grade nine, stood close to the door with a bunch of his friends. He pointed at me and laughed. Just as he had when he found out I'd liked him. Trent let go of my hand and growled louder. Unsure what he'd do, I moved to stand almost in front of him. I sucked in my breath as I watched his brown eyes lighten to gold and his pupils become mere slits

like a cat's. When Brad laughed again, Trent pushed me aside and launched himself at Brad. In midair, a shimmering glow outlined his body as it began to change, to shift. One moment he was Trent and in the next a black cougar had taken his place.

As the black cougar in my dream growled with rage I woke myself up. Sitting up in bed, I tried to calm down my rapid breathing. I told myself it had only been a dream. Somehow the black cougar subconsciously had become connected to Trent. Maybe it had to do with the web search I'd done on the Okanagan people. Even though I knew the dream had only been a product of my overactive imagination, I tossed and turned for the rest of the night, unable to go back into a deep sleep.

* * * *

The next morning I awoke with a headache caused from lack of sleep. Rolling over onto my side, I looked at my alarm clock. It was only nine in the morning. I groaned, but knew I wouldn't try to go back to sleep. I debated whether or not I should take a shower since I planned to work out with Trent later in the day. In the end, I decided to take one. I could always take another afterwards. The shower would help clear the cobwebs out of my head.

Feeling a bit out of sorts since I hadn't gotten a full night's sleep, I dragged myself out of bed and headed down the hall to the bathroom. The sound of Mom and Dad talking downstairs drifted up the stairs. They always got up before I did on the weekends. I locked myself in the bathroom and

brushed my teeth before I turned on the shower. The warm shower helped wake me up, but it didn't get rid of my headache. Back inside my bedroom, I dressed in a pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt, then went downstairs to get something to eat.

Mom shook her head when she saw me. "Are you sure you don't want to go back to bed, Mika? You look like you could use some more sleep."

"I wish I *could* sleep." I sat down at the kitchen table and massaged my aching temples with my fingertips.

"Did something keep you awake?"

"Just a bad dream. I couldn't go back into a deep sleep after that. I think I spent the rest of the night half awake and half asleep. Now I have a headache."

Dad got up from the table and went over to the coffee-maker. He took out a mug and filled it with coffee. He mixed some cream and sugar into it before he placed it on the table in front of me. "This should help. I put lots of cream and sugar in it just the way you like it."

"Thanks, Dad." I prefer tea over coffee, but the coffee would give me a caffeine boost quicker than the tea would.

"So what do you have planned for the day, kiddo?" Mom asked.

After a couple sips of coffee, I answered. "Trent's going to pick me up this afternoon. He's going to take me to his place. To show me how to lift weights."

Dad started to choke on his coffee. Mom whacked him on the back until he got his breath back.

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“I think it’s great he would offer to do that,” she said, “There’s nothing wrong with a girl your age wanting to lift weights.” She gave Dad a hard stare before she turned back to me. “Just make sure you’re home for dinner.”

“I promise.”

The caffeine slowly started to kick in while I drank the coffee. My headache eased enough so I didn’t think my head would fall off if I bent over. Not feeling up to cereal this morning, I got up and put some bread into the toaster. As I waited for the toast to be done, the images of Trent shifting into a black cougar played through my mind. With a shake of my head I pushed the images away. Trent could no more shape-shift into a black cougar than I could. Sometimes it didn’t pay to have a vivid imagination.

Chapter 9

Shortly after one in the afternoon, the sound of a car pulling into our driveway reached my ears where I sat in the living room. Not wanting to look as if I'd been anxiously sitting here for him to arrive, I waited for Trent to come up to the front door and ring the doorbell before I got up. When the doorbell did ring, I shot off the couch and went to answer it.

Trent smiled after I pulled open the door. "Are you ready to go?"

With a nod, I turned back to the house and yelled, "Mom, I'm leaving now." When I heard her call down from upstairs to make sure I came home on time, I stepped outside onto the porch next to Trent and shut the front door behind me.

I followed Trent off the porch to where his car sat parked in the driveway. After doing a double take at the not very old black Ford Mustang, I looked over the roof of the car at Trent. "This is your *Mom's* car?"

Trent nodded. "Yup. Mom's always wanted one, so on her birthday a couple of years back my Dad surprised her with it."

"And she lets you drive this whenever you want?"

"Not exactly. She only let me drive it yesterday and today because I told her I wanted to impress a girl I was going to see. So—are you impressed?"

With a chuckle, I said, "I guess you could say I am."

Trent sent me a crooked smile. "Good. You can get in. The door isn't locked."

I got into the passenger side and put on my seatbelt as Trent climbed in the driver's. The engine roared to life as soon as he turned the key. He put it in reverse and backed out onto the street. Looking back at the house, I saw Jared standing in the living room window watching us leave. To bug him, I stuck out my tongue before Trent pulled away.

Turning to look at Trent, I cleared my throat. Now that we were alone inside his car, the kiss we had shared the day before came to the forefront of my mind. "So."

"So?" Trent gazed over at me quickly before he turned his attention back onto the road.

"I don't know. Just thought to use it to get a conversation going."

"Ahh."

Trent wasn't exactly helping to keep it going. "So, your parents don't mind you having me over?"

"No."

"Good." The silence stretched between us again. "You're

not real talkative today, are you?"

"Sorry. I don't want to get distracted while I'm driving. If I have an accident in this car my Mom'll kill me."

"Then I guess I'd better shut up and let you drive."

At least Trent got to drive his Mom's car. Dad hadn't let me drive his new car yet. Not that he thinks I'm a bad driver; it's just he's a bit overprotective of it since it's so new.

I took turns watching the scenery go by and watching Trent. Personally, I figured he was the nicer out of the two to watch. Again, he wore his long hair loose. He wore a looser fitting t-shirt and a pair of sweat pants instead of jeans. I guess I'd picked the right clothes this morning to work out in.

A short while later, Trent pulled into the driveway of a house that sat in a modest neighborhood in Vernon. Once he parked the car, we both got out and headed for the front door. Trent pulled open the screen door and then opened the inside door. I followed him into the house.

"Mom? I'm back," he called.

A woman, who looked to be in her forties, stepped into the hallway from one of the other rooms. She had long straight black hair that fell almost to her waist. She also had the same copper-colored skin as Trent. She smiled and held out her hand to Trent. "That didn't take very long. Keys, please."

Trent placed the ring of keys in her hand. He then turned and motioned me over to stand beside him. "This is Mika, Mom. Mika, this is my Mom."

"It's nice to meet you, Mika."

"It's nice to meet you as well, Mrs. Hunter."

Trent's Mom shook her head. "No need to be so formal around here. You can call me Lynne."

"Okay, Lynne."

She nodded her head in approval. "Enjoy your workout, Mika, and try not to let Trent make you work out too hard." She then left us alone.

"Come on, Mika. I have my weights set up in the basement."

I followed Trent through the basement door and down the stairs. The finished basement was larger than the one at my house. Thick wall-to-wall grey carpeting covered every inch of the floor. It didn't take me long to spot the workout bench set up in the far corner of the room.

Trent moved to the pile of stacked metal weights and put two of the largest ones on either side of the empty barbell that sat over the bench on supports. Each plate had the number forty-five painted on it. I quickly added up how many pounds Trent had put on the barbell. Well crap, no wonder he didn't have any problem picking me off my feet. And I'm not exactly what you would call a lightweight either.

Trent sat down on the bench and lay down under the barbell. He grabbed the bar in both hands, lifted it off the supports, and slowly lowered it to his chest. What seemed like little effort on his part, he pushed it up until his arms were straight once again. He did seven more reps before he placed the bar back onto the supports on either side of the bench. He stood, not even breathing hard, and motioned for

me to take his place on the bench.

I looked at the weights on the bar and then at Trent. "Hmm, I don't think I can lift that."

He shook his head and laughed. "I didn't think you could. I'm going to take all the weights off. You're just going to be lifting the bar to start."

"Sure—make me look like a wimp, why don't you?" I said as I sat down on the bench.

"I started off like that as well."

"Yeah, right," I scoffed. "You just said that to me feel better."

"Come on. Let's see what you can do. If it's too light I can always put on some weights."

I lay back the way Trent had done and grasped the now empty barbell. Trent moved to stand behind me. He made lifting the bar off the supports seem easy, but I couldn't budge it. "Ahh, a little help."

Trent grabbed the bar in the space between my hands and lifted with me. He let go once I steadied the bar. With a deep breath, I slowly lowered the bar to my chest. It wobbled and tilted one way and then the other both on the way down as well as on the way back up. I managed to do five more reps before I had to give up. Of course Trent had to help me put the bar back onto the supports.

Sitting up, breathing as if I'd just run a marathon, I said, "Holy crap, that was hard."

"And you were worried that you'd look like a wimp benching just the bar."

“Oh shut up.”

Trent laughed as he put the weights he used back onto the barbell. “Once you learn how to balance the bar it’ll be easier.”

“If you say so.” I highly doubted it.

An hour flew by as Trent showed me how to use his dumbbells and the barbell to work out not only my chest but my arms and legs as well. By the time he called it quits I was sweating like a pig and felt as if I could drink a gallon of water. Trent was sweating as well, but nowhere near as badly as me.

I just about swallowed my tongue when he pulled off his t-shirt and used it to wipe the sweat off his chest. I’d been admiring the way his muscles flexed as we worked out, but to see Trent’s naked chest with his muscles filmed in sweat—I couldn’t tear my gaze away from it. His physique made me want to drool.

“Do you want something to drink, Mika?”

“Wha...what?”

“I asked if you want something to drink.”

“Sure. Okay.” I forced my gaze higher and looked Trent in the face. “Water would be great.” The smile I saw in his eyes told me he knew exactly what I’d been staring at like a brainless idiot.

“There’s some bottled water upstairs in the fridge.”

My legs felt shaky as we walked over to the stairs. I let Trent start up them first. My legs shook even more as I took the first step and then the next. If not for the banister that I

used to pull myself up with, I'd never have made it to the top.

Inside the kitchen, Trent took two bottles of water out of the fridge and handed me one. I took off the cap and downed half the bottle in one breath. Taking a big breath in, I started to lift the bottle to my lips again, but I noticed Trent watched me. With a shrug, I said, "I'm really thirsty."

He chuckled. "I can tell."

I put the water bottle to my lips and finished the rest of the water. Trent took the empty bottle and placed it on the counter. He continued to sip from his.

"I've a notion I'm going to feel this later. My legs already feel like wet spaghetti."

Trent smiled at me knowingly. "Wait until tomorrow. That's when you'll really have sore muscles."

"Terrific. Something to look forward to." Sarcasm laced my words.

"Once you've worked out for a while, you'll come to like the way your muscles ache."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, right. I'm so not into pain."

"Just wait and see." Trent put the lid back on his bottle of water and stuck it back in the fridge. "Let me just go and grab a clean shirt, then I'll take you home."

"Sure."

After Trent left, I looked out the kitchen window. I saw his Mom outside in the backyard working in a large flower garden. She looked to be pulling weeds. The garden had a bunch of roses, lilies and some other flowers I didn't know the names of. The flowers looked healthy and well cared for.

I turned back to the kitchen when I heard footsteps coming from behind me. Thinking it was Trent coming back already, I said, "That didn't take you very..." My words fell away when I saw it wasn't Trent after all.

A man, who I assumed was Trent's Dad, stood just inside the kitchen. He looked like an older version of Trent, right down to the long black hair pulled back into a ponytail. And he was tall. He had to be close to six and a half feet. I had to crane my neck to look up at him. He definitely made me feel short.

He smiled, the same crooked smile Trent made. "Hello."

With one hand I pushed my sweat-dampened hair out of my eyes. "Hi. I'm just waiting for Trent."

He moved further into the room. "You must be Mika. I'm Trent's dad, Travis. I see you survived your workout."

"Yeah."

At that point, Trent returned. He came to stand beside his Dad. Their similar features were quite easy to see when they stood side by side.

"I see you met, Mika, Dad."

Travis nodded. "Yes. She told me she was waiting for you. Are you taking her home now?"

"I just have to go ask for Mom's car keys."

"Here," Travis pulled a set of keys out of his pants' front pocket and handed them to Trent, "take my car. Your Mom's car is in the garage and I'm parked behind it. And you can take your time."

"All right."

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Trent turned and motioned with his head for me to follow him. I said a quick goodbye to his Dad before I walked out of the kitchen with Trent.

Chapter 10

Trent unlocked the passenger's side door of his Dad's late model red Pontiac Grand Prix. He then went around to the driver's side as I opened the door and got in. Before he started the car, Trent turned in my direction. "Do you want to go to the lake, or do you have to go home right now?"

I knew which lake Trent meant—Okanagan Lake. I had at least a couple of hours still before Mom wanted me home for dinner. "I have time."

"Good."

It didn't take Trent long to drive to one of the parks along the shore of the lake. After he parked the car, we got out and headed for the interlocking brick walkway that wound around the shore of the lake. Trent took my hand and led me to one of the docks jutting out into the water. We leaned against the railing as the cool air from the lake blew over us.

After being over-heated from our workout, the cool breeze felt good against my skin. I closed my eyes and lifted

my face to the sun. I opened them to find Trent staring at me. "What?"

"Nothing. I'm just watching you soak up the sun."

"Unlike you, I have to work at getting a tan."

Trent held up our clasped hands and looked down at our arms. "You don't look that pale."

I still had the tan I'd worked on over the summer holidays, but Trent's skin was still darker than mine. "Once winter arrives I'll lose the tan. When spring comes and it warms up enough to wear shorts, I can blind people with my glow-in-the-dark white legs."

Trent chuckled. "It can't be that bad."

I nodded. "Yup, it is. Seriously."

He shook his head as he turned and look out over the water. "It's nice here, but I prefer to go to the reservation instead. The place I go is closer to nature, if you know what I mean?"

"You mean it doesn't have man-made pathways to stroll along."

"Exactly. I'd rather go for a hike through the bush any day. How about you? Do you like to go on nature hikes?"

I grimaced. "I guess it wouldn't be so bad if I had someone to go with that knew where they were going. My sense of direction is terrible. If I had to go by myself I'd end up lost and going in circles for days."

Trent let go of my hand and wrapped his arm around my shoulders as he pulled me close. "I wouldn't let you get lost, Mika. I have an excellent sense of direction."

I gazed up into Trent's eyes. *Will he kiss me again?* There were a few other people around, but no one happened to be too close to us.

"Well in that case, if you were the one I went on the nature hike with, I guess it wouldn't be so bad." My breath caught as Trent leaned closer.

He rubbed the tip of his nose against mine. "I'll have to take you sometime, before it gets cold."

Not wanting to spoil the moment, I nodded. I pushed myself closer to Trent and lifted my face higher in the hopes that he would take it as a sign that I wouldn't mind if he kissed me. My heart raced as he closed his eyes and pressed his nose to mine. He was so close I could smell his scent each time I took a breath. It wasn't an unpleasant smell. For someone who'd worked up a sweat earlier, he didn't smell bad by any means. His scent smelled musky, manly. I groaned to myself when that thought entered my head. It must be a side-effect from reading too many romance novels—they now had me thinking like one of the heroines in one.

Trent sighed as he kissed the tip of my nose before he pulled back. "I guess I should take you home before I decide to keep you." He smiled crookedly at me.

I gulped. "That would be no hardship. I mean, you keeping me."

He continued to smile as he shook his head. "Don't tempt me." Trent's face turned serious. "I like being around you, Mika. Makes me wish I had gotten to know you sooner."

"I like being around you too." My voice sounded too

breathily for my liking. I cleared my throat. "I wouldn't mind if we hung out more often."

With his arm still around my shoulders, Trent turned away from the railing. I put my arm around his waist as we walked back toward his Dad's car. Right now, it wouldn't have been too hard to convince myself that Trent actually liked me, and that maybe I stood a chance with him. Silvia and her crew weren't around to see us, or hear what he said, so it wasn't as if he did it for their benefit. Maybe things weren't so one-sided after all.

Trent kept me held to his side as he unlocked the car door. He let go once he pulled it open. I got inside and quickly moved across the seat to unlock his door.

Once Trent had the car started, he picked up my hand and placed it on his thigh just above his knee. After he backed the car out of the parking spot and headed out of the park, he placed his hand on top of mine. I felt the hard muscle of his thigh under my hand through his sweat pants. His thigh muscle bunched when he moved his foot off the gas and onto the brake. It made me long to reach across the seat and touch the rest of him, to test to see if all his muscles felt as hard.

Focused completely on Trent, I didn't realize we'd arrived at my house until he stopped at the curb and put the car in park. Before I could say anything, he cupped the back of my head with his hand, leaned across his seat and kissed me. His lips moved over mine as I squeezed his thigh. By the time he pulled away I felt as if all the air had left my lungs.

"I'll see you tomorrow at school, Mika."

I sucked in a big breath of air. "Yeah, see you tomorrow."

My legs shook as I opened the car door and got out. The shaking had more to do with Trent's kiss than the workout. I stood on the boulevard and waved as he put the car back in gear and drove away. This weekend had turned out to be better than I'd hoped for. As for what had happened at the tree fort, I decided to let it go for now. Whatever I thought I'd seen hadn't happened today while I'd been around Trent. Did I really want to screw things up with him by questioning him about it? Not in this life time.

* * * *

The sound of my alarm clock going off the next morning woke me. Still half asleep, I reached for it where it sat on the small table next to my bed. The movement caused me to groan in pain. My arms, chest and shoulders ached as I switched off my alarm clock and stretched. I tested out my legs and found they hurt just as much as my arms did. My whole body seemed to be one big ache. Trent hadn't been kidding when he said I'd feel it more the next day.

Painfully, I pushed myself up into a sitting position and swung my legs over the side of the bed. *Ow*. That didn't feel good at all. It made me wonder if I'd be able to stand up, let alone be able to walk. Knowing I'd see Trent that day in school was enough motivation to get me up on my feet. My muscles seemed to shriek in protest as I slowly made my way over to my dresser.

Barely making it through the painful process of getting dressed, I then headed downstairs. The stairs presented a bit

of a problem at first, but I managed to make my way down them as I leaned on the railing for support.

Mom watched me limp my way into the kitchen. She put her hand over her mouth. I still could see the laughter lurking in her eyes. I did my best rendition of how a person would look with a pickle stuck up their butt as I walked over to the kitchen table and, with care, sat down. The only good thing was Jared had yet to come downstairs.

"Are you really sore?" Mom asked as she handed me the box of cereal.

"You could say that. My body feels as if I've been run over by a very large truck." With gritted teeth against the pain, I reached for the container of milk and poured some into my cereal.

This time Mom didn't hold back her laughter. I furrowed my brows at her. She shook her head. "I'm sorry, but you have no idea how funny it was to watch you walk into the kitchen. How are you going to manage at school?"

"Thanks, Mom. That's what I really needed this morning, to have my own mother laughing at me. I'll manage somehow. I'm not taking the day off school just because I can't walk without being in pain."

"Poor Mika." Mom bit back a laugh. "I feel for you. I really do."

Jared came into the kitchen and sat down at the table across from me. I felt his stare on me as I lifted a spoonful of cereal to my mouth. I groaned quietly.

"What's wrong with you?" Jared asked.

"I'm a bit sore from working out."

"Oh." He reached for the box of cereal. "Are you going to see Trent today?"

"Yeah."

"Is he coming over again this weekend?"

"I don't know. Why do you want to know?"

Jared shrugged. "I was just interested. I think Trent's cool."

"Trent's mine. If you want him for a boyfriend you have to go find someone else."

"Eww, gross." Jared pretended to throw up. "And for your information I'm not gay, dumb ass. I just thought it would be cool to hang out with Trent."

"Forget it."

"When I go to Vernon next year, I could always hang out with Trent then."

"Don't count on it. Next year, both Trent and I'll be seniors. Seniors usually won't be caught dead hanging out with a little kid in grade eight."

"Maybe I should ask Trent and see what he says. Maybe he wouldn't mind."

I narrowed my eyes at Jared. "No, you won't. If you're going to be a pain in the butt when Trent's around I won't ask him to come over anymore."

"Enough you two." Mom put my lunch bag on the table next to me. "You'd better hurry up, Mika. It's getting late."

Ignoring Jared, I quickly finished the cereal in my bowl and grabbed my lunch bag. Since my legs had stiffened up

from sitting, I had to pull myself up using the table. Jared snickered, but I didn't bother to tell him to shut up.

* * * *

I arrived at school and parked as close to the school entrance as I could get. Today, I'd rather put up with waiting in a long line up of cars to get out of the parking lot at the end of the day than have to walk a long distance to get to the school. With my backpack slung over my shoulder, I headed for the school's entrance. I forced myself to walk as normally as possible, even though it hurt more to do it.

I was opening my locker when Trent came up behind me and asked, "Sore?"

I turned around to face him. "More than you can possibly know."

Trent chuckled. "I thought as much. I watched you walk down the hall and couldn't miss how you had your jaw clenched as if you were in pain."

"I have to stop myself from whimpering when I walk."

He chuckled again. "I'm sorry, Mika. I guess I worked you out too hard yesterday. I didn't think you would be this sore."

"I'm partly to blame as well. I've never lifted a weight in my life before yesterday. I should have known I'd have to take it easy." I turned back to my locker and put the books I needed for the morning inside my backpack.

"Here, let me make it up to you. It's the least I can do." Trent took my backpack and swung it onto his free shoulder. "Come on, cripple. I'll help you to homeroom."

“Just don’t walk too fast.”

Trent wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me up against his side. He gave my shoulder a squeeze, which caused me to suck in my breath. He quickly loosened his hold. “Sorry. I forgot you’d be sore in other places besides your legs.”

With my arm around his waist, Trent started to walk at a slow pace. I leaned against him for support. “If you wanted to apply for the job of torturer, you’d easily get it. All you’d have to do is force your poor victims to work out until they collapsed. The real torture though wouldn’t begin until the next day when they woke up with all their muscles screaming in pain.”

“It doesn’t last, you know. You’re only this sore because it’s the first time you’ve lifted weights. Once you get used to it, it isn’t so bad.”

I gave him a stare that said I thought he was full of crap. “From my stand point, I really can’t picture that happening. I don’t know if I’ll even survive this day, let alone be able to lift a weight again.”

Trent bent and kissed the top of my head, one place where I didn’t hurt. “You’ll feel better once you’ve had a chance to walk around. The muscles just need to be stretched to loosen up.” He started to massage my shoulder as we walked.

“Ow, ow. Stop that. That isn’t helping it feel better.”

“Okay, I’ll stop. Maybe I should kiss it better instead.”

I felt my face grow warm when I thought of all the places

where my body hurt, and how I would love for Trent to kiss them better. Swallowing as I licked my suddenly dry lips, I looked up at him and nodded. He sucked in a breath as his eyes lightened for a split second. His gaze seemed to latch onto my lips.

He groaned. "You're killing me, Mika."

I would have asked him if it was in a good or bad way, but we'd arrived at our homeroom. Inside the classroom, Trent gave me my backpack before he took a seat at the desk beside mine. When the teacher arrived and started the lesson, I couldn't stop thinking of what it would have been like to have Trent kiss my shoulder better. As if Trent knew what I thought, he sent me more than one look of longing. By the end of the class I'd no idea what Mr. Morrison had tried to teach. I was in trouble. At the rate I was going I'd be lucky to pass Math this semester.

Chapter 11

The rest of the week passed pretty much the same as the week before. Trent and I spent each lunch period together. He still amazed me by how much food he could consume in such a short amount of time. I even asked Mom to pack extra food so I could give him some when he ate all his so I wouldn't end up finishing after he did.

By the middle of the week my muscles no longer hurt. I no longer walked as if I had a pickle shoved up my butt. And much to my surprise, I felt ready to go for another round of weight lifting. Even though I'd only worked out the one time, I liked how I felt after I no longer had to put up with the pain. My muscles didn't feel quite as soft as they had before. With just that one workout that led to very small results, I could now easily see how people became addicted to working out. I wanted to torture myself again.

Not that Trent had asked me over again to his place for another workout. I really didn't need that much help with my Math, so I hadn't asked Trent over to my place. After Mon-

day I forced myself to pay attention, and since it wasn't that much different from the work Trent had helped me with, I found I understood it. Since I didn't have that as an excuse to ask him over, I didn't want to be pushy and invite myself over to his house.

Now the last day of the school week, Trent still hadn't mentioned anything about getting together for another workout during the weekend. He also hadn't tried to kiss me again. I'd thought for sure after the kiss he'd laid on me this past Sunday we were headed down the road to becoming a couple. But the closest he came all week was when he'd offered to kiss my shoulder better. Being unsure of what his true feelings really were, I didn't take things past the hand-holding we'd been doing.

At the end of lunch on Friday, Trent couldn't walk me to my locker before the next class as he usually did. His teacher wanted him and the other kids in his class to arrive before the bell rang since he had a movie he wanted them to watch, taking up the whole period. Must be nice. I said 'bye to him outside the cafeteria doors, still half-expecting him to mention something about getting together this weekend. Instead, he said 'bye back and left for his class.

With only a couple minutes left before the next class started, I hurried to my locker. I undid the lock and reached inside for the books I needed for the rest of the day. As I grabbed the books off the top shelf I saw a small folded piece of paper lying on the bottom of my locker. I picked it up and unfolded it. A smile spread across my face as I read what had

been scrawled across it.

Trent must have managed to slip the note inside my locker when I wasn't looking. It also explained why he hadn't said anything about seeing me on the weekend. In the note, he asked me to meet him on Saturday afternoon at Okanagan Lake at the reservation. On the bottom of the sheet of paper, he'd even drawn a rough map where he wanted to meet on the reservation. I bit my bottom lip when I saw that I'd have to do some hiking through some bushy areas.

I quickly shoved my books and Trent's note into my backpack before I closed my locker. On my way to class, I couldn't stop thinking about Saturday. One part of me was pleased Trent had invited me, but another part of me felt a little unsure. *Trent knows about my crappy sense of direction. Why would he ask me to meet him in a place where I've never been before?* Maybe he thought even I could follow his map, but I wasn't so sure. My map-reading skills ranked up there with my sense of direction—both sucked on a big scale.

Even though I'd be nervous as hell about getting lost, I knew I'd still meet Trent. I could do it. I just had to believe I could, or at least that's what I told myself. Hopefully I wouldn't make an ass of myself by getting lost and having to have Trent come find me.

* * * *

"Are you sure you want to do this, Mika?" Mom asked. "Wouldn't it be better if you called Trent and have him meet you here instead?"

I shook my head. "No, Mom. I want to do this." I pulled

a light nylon jacket out of my bedroom closet and put it inside my backpack. I didn't want to go hiking unprepared since it had turned out to be an overcast day.

"You have your cell phone with you?"

"Yes, Mom. I have it and the map. I'll be fine. If I get lost I'll call, so stop worrying."

Mom's worried expression didn't leave her face even after my reassurances. "I don't know, Mika. You're not exactly an outdoorsy-type girl."

I zipped my backpack closed and swung it up onto my shoulder. "Well, there's always a first time for everything."

"Yes, and there's always a first time to have a search party sent out after you as well."

"Mom, you are *so* not helping." I left my bedroom and headed down the stairs. Mom followed behind me.

At the front door she stopped me one last time. "Just be careful, Mika. And I know you think you can do this, but it would do a lot to make me feel better if you phoned when you've met up with Trent. Then I'll know for sure you aren't wandering around in the bush lost somewhere."

"Fine." I grumped. "I'll call you."

Outside, I quickly got into my car and pulled away from the house. I already knew where I had to drive to reach the hiking trail Trent had mapped out. So the map stayed in my backpack for now. It wasn't a long drive to reach the reservation lands. When I arrived at the lake, I parked the car and looked up at the sky. Dark clouds scudded by, looking as if they promised rain. It seemed as if I had a very good chance of

getting wet.

I pulled my jacket and the map out of my backpack. I slipped the jacket on before I looked at the map and tried to get my bearings. Much to my dismay, it took me a full minute to figure out where to go. Hopefully that wasn't a sign of how things would go for the rest of the day.

With my backpack hanging off both my shoulders instead of one as I do in school, I started out on my hike. There was a bit of a path to follow, if you wanted to call it that. It looked more like a trail that had been formed from people walking on it rather than a planned path.

Following the map, I made my way to the lake. I had to skirt around it and find another path that would take me into the bush. This part of the trail I dreaded. Most likely here would be the place to get lost. The trail I'd been following disappeared at the tree line. With a deep breath, I forced myself to step into the trees.

It was much gloomier among the trees, but they did shelter me some when it started to rain. According to the map, I had to cross through this wooded area and come out the other end to pick up the trail again. Having to step over fallen branches, or fallen trees, slowed me down. Sometimes I couldn't get over the tree, but had to skirt my way around it.

I'd been walking for at least fifteen minutes and still couldn't see a break in the trees that would tell me I'd reached the other side. I'd no idea if I was headed in the right direction or not. I couldn't see the sun because of the clouds and the trees rising above me. Even if I could have seen the

sun, it wouldn't have helped. Part of being able to read a map was knowing where north, south, east, and west were, which I wouldn't have known unless I had a compass. And the map didn't have those kinds of directions.

After what seemed like an hour of hard slugging through the trees, I finally came to the end of the bush area. Just as I stepped out into what appeared to be a clearing, the sky decided to open up. It wasn't quite a downpour, but it was close enough. I yanked my hood up and tried to find the trail I still had to follow.

Once I found the trail, I took the map out of my pocket. With my hand held over top of it, I tried to shield it as much as I could from the rain. According to it, Trent would be meeting me in the middle of this clearing. I shoved the map back into my pocket for safekeeping and trudged on.

By the time I reached the middle of the clearing my feet were soaked and water had started to leak through my jacket. I looked around, but I couldn't see any sign of Trent. Could I have missed him? I didn't think so. According to my watch I had arrived right on time. *Where can he be?*

Five minutes went by, then ten, then twenty and still Trent didn't show up. Drenched and starting to feel cold, I debated whether I should continue to stand out here looking like a drowned rat, or head back to my car and forget about the whole thing. In the end, I decided I'd give Trent ten more minutes. If he hadn't shown up by then, I was outta here.

The sound of a branch snapping made me turn to see where the noise had come from, but I couldn't see anything. I

stiffened when I heard the roar of a large cat that sounded very close by. That so wasn't good.

A loud growl sounded to my left. Slowly, I turned to face what had made the growl. I froze in place as a large cougar stalked closer. Rain water rolled off the cat's grey-brown fur. His gold-colored eyes latched onto me as he moved closer. I knew the cougar was a male. He was too big to be a female. He had to be at least nine feet in length from the tip of his nose to the tip of his tail.

I bit back a whimper as raw fear coursed through my body. The urge to turn around and run just about took me over, but I forced myself to keep still. Running would only make him go on the attack.

With careful steps, I slowly took a step back and then another. The cougar hunched down until his belly almost touched the ground as he matched my steps. I took another step back, this time bigger than the last. My attention focused on the cougar in front of me, I didn't see the large rock on the ground behind me. As I stepped down on it, I twisted my ankle and lost my balance. I went down hard on my butt in the wet grass.

The cougar growled as he bunched his back legs under him, readying himself to jump. I instinctively threw up my arms in front of my face. Just when the cougar launched himself in my direction, a streak of black came out of nowhere and slammed into him. I put down my arms to better see what had stopped the cougar. Blinking the rain out of my eyes, I watched a second big cat take on the first. It was a

black cougar, and it was another large male.

Still in shock and unable to move, I sat in the wet grass as I watched the two cougars battle it out. The black cougar soon gained the upper hand. He overpowered the other cougar and chased him off. Once the first cougar disappeared into the trees, the black cougar turned and slowly crossed to where I sat.

Before I could collect my thoughts enough to force myself to get up and try to get away, the black cougar moved to stand over me. A whimper rose up inside me as the cat moved even closer until his four paws straddled my body and we were practically nose to nose. My breath caught in my throat with fear while my heart thudded against my ribs. I couldn't help but think I was looking into the face of death. The cougar only had to take me by the throat and it would be game over.

I stared into his gold eyes. Unlike the first cat, this one didn't seem quite so aggressive. If anything, he seemed the opposite, given the loud purrs he started to make. Along with the purrs, he head-butted my chin a couple of times, then rubbed his face against my cheek. I held myself perfectly still when his rough, raspy tongue came out and licked my jaw as he continued to purr loudly in my ear. I silently hoped he wasn't trying to see if I tasted good or not.

The cougar nuzzled the side of my throat. My heart beat even faster as he used his face to nudge my jacket and the collar of my shirt aside from where my shoulder and neck met. He dragged his tongue across that spot just before he bit me

hard. Unable to stop myself, I whimpered as he held onto me with his sharp teeth. Even though I hadn't whimpered very loud, it was enough to get a reaction out of the cougar. With a loud growl, he let go and took off at a run into the trees.

Breathing as if I'd just run a marathon, I reached up and put my hand on the bite mark. My fingers came away spotted with blood. Not wanting to wait around to see if the black cougar would come back to take another bite out of me, I quickly stood. Shaking, I turned in a circle, not sure which way to go or what to do. I didn't want to hike through the trees again. For all I knew both cougars could still be in the trees, waiting to pounce.

Hating how close to the verge of tears I was, I tried to calm down. I let out a yelp as someone grabbed me from behind. The hand that gripped my arm spun me around. I then lost it completely. With my eyes blurred with tears, I threw myself into Trent's arms and started to blubber like a baby.

Chapter 12

“What are you doing out here, Mika?” When I didn’t answer Trent right away, he grabbed me by both my arms and held me out in front of him. “Mika, calm down. Why did you come out here alone?”

I took a big hiccupping breath as I tried to pull myself together. “I...I came out here to meet you like your note said.”

Trent scowled. “What note? I didn’t give you any note.”

“Then what’s this?”

I reached inside my jacket pocket and pulled out the note with the map and handed it to Trent. The rain continued to pour down on us as he read what had been written on the piece of paper. When he finished, he balled the now sopping-wet paper in his hand and handed it back.

“I didn’t write that note, Mika. That’s not my handwriting.”

Confused, I asked, “Then how did you know where to find me?”

Trent continued to give me a hard look. I couldn’t tell if

he was pissed off at me or just pissed off about someone giving me a note that supposedly came from him. "Your Mom told me. I went to your house to see if you wanted to do something today. She said you'd come here to meet me."

Great. Mom'll be freaking out right about now. "If you didn't put that note in my locker, then who did?"

"I've no idea." Trent reached up and brushed my jacket aside. His finger lightly touched the bite mark on my neck. His face grew even harder.

About to explain how I got the bite mark, and about my encounter with the black cougar, I heard someone call Trent's name. We both turned to watch this new person walk toward us. Judging by his black shoulder-length hair and tanned skin, I figured he was Okanagan. He also appeared to be a teenager about the same age as Trent and me.

Trent curled his lip when the boy stopped a short distance away. "Back off, Craig."

Craig shook his head. "I didn't come here to start a fight with you, at least not yet. You're in my territory."

"I only came here to get the girl."

I watched Craig as he came closer. He was just about as tall as Trent, and just as muscular. He could by no means be called ugly, but he didn't do anything for me. Not like Trent.

Craig stopped when he stood a foot away. He seemed to be studying me as closely as I did him. When his gaze latched onto the bite mark, he snorted and shook his head. He turned his gaze onto Trent. "Nice mark. I'm getting the impression she's more than just 'the girl' to you."

Trent made a low growling sound in the back of his throat. "It's none of your fricking business."

"I wouldn't piss me off, Trent," Craig growled back. "Remember, you're just another lone male on my territory. That alone gives me the right to try and take you down in a fight. Do you want to risk it in front of your 'girlfriend?'"

Craig's implied threat had me turning to see Trent's reaction. What I saw made me gasp in shock. His eyes had changed from brown to gold—a gold that all too much reminded me of the color of the black cougar's eyes. With his hands fisted at his sides, Trent growled a growl—and one that could all too easily be mistaken for a cougar's. My gaze shot over to Craig, knowing I wouldn't be the only one to notice the difference in Trent. Instead of seeing the expected expression of shock on Craig's face, I found his eyes had also turned the same shade of gold. His lip curled back in a threatening snarl.

"I'm not one of your boys, Craig," Trent said through his clenched jaw. "And speaking of your boys, tell the one I chased off that if he ever pulls a stunt like that again, he'll be lucky to slink away a second time."

"Then I suggest you keep your girl off my territory. If she ever comes back here alone again, she'll be fair game. Maybe then someone else's mark will be on her neck."

I just about jumped out of my skin when Trent lurched forward and roared like a cat at Craig. I slowly backed away from them as they stood snarling at each other like a couple of wild cats. Not sure of what I'd gotten myself into, I decided it

would be best if I got as far away from them as possible.

Taking advantage of their distraction, I turned on my heels and took off at a run toward the trees. It wasn't that I was afraid of Trent really—I found Craig to be the scarier of the two. I just didn't want to get caught in the middle of it if they decided to have a go at each other. But seeing Trent like this didn't exactly give me the warm fuzzies either.

I'd almost made it to the tree line when a strong arm grabbed me around the waist and pulled me to a stop. I screamed when I ended being held captive against a hard chest. In the hopes of freeing myself, I jabbed my elbow into the ribs of whoever held me.

"Stop it, Mika," Trent commanded.

At the sound of his growled words I stopped struggling to get free. Trent relaxed his hold, allowing me to turn around to face him. I gulped when I saw his eyes were still gold. I couldn't tear my gaze away from them. His pupils had even narrowed like a cat's.

With both my hands on Trent's chest I tried to break free of his hold, but he didn't release me. Confused, trying to make sense of the changes in him, I blurted, "What the hell are you, Trent? How can your eyes change like that? And what was all that about with Craig?"

Trent didn't say anything in response to my questions. He merely held me against him with an arm wrapped around my waist as he threaded the fingers of his other hand through my wet hair at the back of my head. His lips slammed down on mine as he held me in place. His grip on my hair tigh-

tened, verging on pain, while he slanted his lips across mine. I futilely pushed at his chest, but it didn't seem to faze him. At another time, if he hadn't been so rough, I would have enjoyed the kiss. But the hard way he held me, scared me more than a little. I didn't want Trent to kiss me this way. I wanted him to kiss me the way he had before.

I bit down hard on his bottom lip. Trent lifted his head and growled at me softly. His arm tightened around my waist as he bent his head to take my lips once again. I reached up and pushed his face away before he could make contact. My voice shook when I spoke. "Stop, Trent. You're scaring me."

Trent stared down at me with a confused look on his face, as if he didn't know what he had done. His gaze fell to my lips—they felt swollen from his kisses. With a groan, he dropped his arms and took a step away. I wrapped my arms around myself as my body started to shake from the cold and what had passed between us. Trent's chest rapidly rose and fell with each breath he took. As I watched, his eyes slowly turned back to brown.

"You're wet and cold. I'll take you back to your car." Trent's voice sounded flat and emotionless.

He started to walk past me, but I grabbed his arm and pulled him to a stop. "That's it? You're going to take me back to my car with no explanations?"

Trent yanked his arm free. "There's nothing to explain." He then turned away and started across the clearing.

I started after him. "Like hell there isn't. Help me understand. You at least owe me that much. First I have the crap

scared out of me by two cougars, and one actually bites me, then you and Craig have some kind of stand off—”

“Drop it, Mika.” Trent interrupted with a snarl.

“I won’t drop it.” I stopped walking. “Fine. I’ll just stay here and wait for one of the cougars to come and take another bite out of me. Maybe it’ll be the black cougar, since he’s the one that bit me in the first place. He seemed to like me.”

Trent turned around and stalked back. He took me by the arm and forced me back into motion. “Enough. You’re not staying here. I’m going to put you in your car and then you’ll go home.”

“You can’t expect me—”

“No more.” Trent stopped walking and gave me a rough shake. “Enough. Let it go. It’s better for you this way.”

I opened my mouth to say more, but the hard look on Trent’s face stopped me from saying what I’d wanted to say. When I closed my mouth, he started walking again as he pulled me along with him. Obviously this was one argument I didn’t have a chance of winning.

With Trent dragging me along behind him, it didn’t take us as long to reach my car as it had taken me to reach the clearing. It helped that he seemed to know unerringly where to walk so no major obstacles blocked our way. By the time we got to the car, I was drenched to the skin and my teeth were chattering with cold. His father’s car was alongside mine.

Trent took my backpack off my back and dug around in it until he found my car keys. He unlocked the driver’s side

with them and threw the backpack onto the front passenger seat. He then turned to face me. His long wet hair hung partially in his face. I resisted the urge to reach up and push it away. With his face set in hard lines, I didn't think he would appreciate the gesture.

"Get in the car."

I didn't want to leave things that way. "What about tomorrow? Do you want to work out together again?"

Trent's gaze skidded across the bite mark on my neck before he lifted his eyes to my face. "No."

With Trent standing there, showing no emotion on his face, I wanted to scream at him to snap out of it. During the walk back to the car, I'd gotten over my original fright. A thousand and one questions filled my head as my inquisitive nature took over. But I knew I wouldn't get any answers this day.

In the hopes that I could get Trent to flash me his crooked smile, I reached up to touch the bite mark. Trent's eyes followed my movement. "I guess today wasn't a complete bust. I got to have an up close and personal encounter with the mythological black cougar. And I have the love bite to prove it."

Trent's face turned even grimmer. "See you later, Mika."

He shoved me into the car and slammed the door shut. "What the hell?" I shouted through the window as I watched Trent get into his father's car.

He didn't as much as look back—simply started his car and drove away. *Well, that was frickin nice. Nothing like leaving*

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me more confused than ever. Now I had the added bonus of having to wait a day and a half before I could see Trent again on top of it all.

I cranked on the car's heater as I started the drive back home. Somehow I had to corner Trent and get him to talk. I knew it would drive me nuts until he gave me the answers I wanted.

Chapter 13

Decidedly not in the best of moods when I arrived home, I slammed the front door closed behind me. Mom came out of the kitchen and confronted me before I had a chance to make it upstairs.

With a look of concern on her face, she asked, “Did Trent find you? Why didn’t you call me?”

I kicked off my soaked running shoes and pulled off my wet jacket. “Yes. I didn’t get a chance to call you. Things got...complicated.”

“Did you figure out what the mix up was? I was really worried after he left here to look for you.”

“Look, Mom, I don’t feel like talking about it right now. Okay? I need to get out of these wet clothes. All I want is a hot shower.”

As I tried to walk around Mom to head up the stairs, she reached out and pulled the collar of my shirt aside. “What happened here? How did you get this? It looks as if something big tried to take a chunk out of you.”

I brushed Mom's hand aside. "It's fine. I'm going to take a shower then I'll put a bandage on it."

"Are you sure you don't want me to look at it first?"

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of it myself," I snapped. I just wanted to be left alone to think through what had taken place at the clearing. If Trent wasn't going to give any straight answers then I was determined to figure it out on my own.

"All right," Mom said. She moved out of the way, allowing me to get by her.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I went to my bedroom and dropped my damp backpack on the floor. I took out some dry clothes and headed for the bathroom. Jared stuck his head out his bedroom door, but he saw my face and obviously made the smart decision not to say anything.

I stripped out of my wet clothes and turned the shower on as hot as I could stand it. I tilted my head back under the spray, and the warm water started to take the chill out of my body. I reached for the shampoo and lathered up my hair. I sucked in a breath through my teeth when the shampoo came in contact with the bite mark low on my neck. It continued to sting for a few minutes as the water washed it out.

My thoughts drifted to the clearing at Okanagan Lake. They kept coming back to the black cougar. The other cougar had been scary, but the black cougar seemed different, less frightening. He'd actually chased the other big cat away. *Do wild cougars normally protect humans from one of their kind?* I didn't think so, which meant the black cougar didn't act as a

wild cougar should.

My mind seemed to get caught on the fact that the black cougar had chased off the other cougar. I kept going over it, replaying it in my head over and over again. Something about it nagged at me, as if it was connected to something else that had taken place in the clearing.

Not until I finished washing my hair and picked up the bar of soap did it all click into place. It was something Trent had said to Craig. *Didn't he tell Craig that he'd chased off one of Craig's boys?* It just seemed too much of a coincidence. But what really gave me that “ah-ha” moment was the way in which Trent had said it to Craig. He hadn't spoken as if he'd chased off Craig's boy in the distant past—to me it sounded as if he'd done it recently.

Not sure if I'd let my mind go way off left field with this thought or not, I stood in the shower and let the water pound on my back. *It can't be. Can it? Do I just have a wild imagination?* I wasn't so sure. Now that I'd come up with this possible explanation, my mind tenaciously refused to let it go. Could there be a connection between Trent and the black cougar? Or more to the fact, did Trent somehow have the ability to shape-shift *into* the black cougar?

I knew if I said any of what I was thinking out loud to anyone, they'd think I had completely lost my frickin mind. But the more I thought about it the more logical it sounded. For one thing, I'd witnessed Trent's eyes change from a rich brown to gold, not once but twice. Well—three times if I counted the split second change I'd seen during the first week

of school. Trent's gold eyes and the black cougar's gold eyes happened to be a match. And the way the black cougar had acted, purring and snuggling into my neck before he bit me, could easily be taken as a cat's way of showing affection. I knew male cats gave female cats love bites.

I let my fingers gently touch the mark on my neck. It could have been a love bite. If the black cougar had wanted to do more damage, he could have torn my throat out instead of giving me a little bite like he had. Was it possible that Trent, in his cat form, wanted to show me I had nothing to fear from him? I knew I'd drive myself crazy with these absurd thoughts if I let them obsess me.

Turning off the shower, I got out and quickly dried myself off. I pulled on my dry clothes before I collected up my wet things and returned to my bedroom. Not wanting to explain to Mom about the forged note that had led me to the clearing in the first place, I decided to stay in my room until dinner time. This would be one of the rare occasions that I wouldn't be able to tell Mom everything that had happened.

* * * *

By Sunday afternoon I knew I'd gone past being a little crazy to most likely being labeled as certifiably nuts. Thoughts of Trent, of the possibility that he and the black cougar were one and the same, swirled around and around in my head. I'd reached the point where I wanted to talk to someone about it so I could get their take on the whole thing. Only one name came to mind—Cathy. She would be the only person who wouldn't outright call me insane for even thinking of the

things I'd been thinking about.

After I got Dad's permission to make a long distance phone call, I went back up to my room and dialed Cathy's number. She answered the phone after the third ring.

"Mika, I thought I was supposed to call you the next time we decided to talk on the phone."

"I know, but I really needed to talk to you."

"Is that so?" Cathy asked with interest sounding in her voice. "Well, I'm all ears. Go for it."

I took a deep breath. "Okay, before I start, I want you to promise you won't laugh."

"Why would I laugh? You know I'd never do that to you."

"If it was something everyday I know you wouldn't, but I don't know if I'm losing it here or not."

Cathy huffed into the phone. "I promise I won't laugh at you. Now what's this all about?"

"You know how Trent and I have gotten closer?"

"Yeah. Did he kiss you again?"

"Yes, but that isn't what I want to tell you. It's what happened before the kiss that's bugging me."

"Fine. We'll get to the kiss after that."

"Okay. I'm going to try and make this short and sweet. I found a note in my locker that told me to meet Trent yesterday at the reservation at Okanagan Lake. That was fine. I hiked through the bush to a clearing and waited for him."

"Oh, man," Cathy said with a laugh. "You really *must* like Trent if you actually went hiking in the bush."

Even though she couldn't see me, I rolled my eyes. "Ha ha, very funny. Can I finish now?"

Cathy stopped laughing. "All right, I've got myself back together."

"Anyway, I was in the clearing and it was pouring down rain. When Trent didn't show up right away, I thought of going back to the car. That's when I heard the first cougar roar."

"What do you mean the first cougar?"

"Cathy, if you keep interrupting me I'm never going to finish what I have to say, and then my Dad'll kill me for the big phone bill I'll rack up."

"Sorry. No more questions for now."

I took a deep breath. "I might as well make this even shorter. Before the first cougar could jump me, a black cougar came out of nowhere and chased the other cougar off. After he did that he came back to me, purred, and licked my face before he gave me what I think is a love bite on the lower part of my neck. Now here's the freaky thing, Trent showed up right after the black cougar left. An Okanagan boy named Craig showed up as well and basically told Trent to get off his territory. I swore it would have come to a fight, considering how both of them growled at each other. I mean they literally growled like cats. I didn't want to end up in the middle of it so I tried to leave, but Trent came after me." I stopped talking and took another deep breath before I finished the story. "Cathy, his eyes had changed to gold. They looked exactly like the black cougar's."

Cathy didn't say anything right away. When she did, she asked slowly, "So what are you trying to tell me?"

"I know it's crazy, but I think Trent was the black cougar."

"Are you sure the sun wasn't in Trent's eyes making them look as if they'd changed color?"

"Hello! It was raining, remember."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot."

"His eyes really were gold, Cathy. It's the second time I've seen them change like that."

"So what are you going to do? You can't just go up to Trent and say 'Hey, can you shape-shift into a black cougar?' He'll think you're nuts."

"I don't know what I'm going to do. I'll wait and see what he does tomorrow at school. If he doesn't say anything about it, I guess I'll have to wait until it happens again. I won't let him fluff me off like he did yesterday when I confronted him about it."

"I think that would be for the best, Mika." Cathy stopped talking and groaned. "I have to go. My Mom wants me to help with something. I'll email you later."

"That's okay. I can't talk for much longer anyway. I feel better now that I had the chance to talk to you."

I heard Cathy's Mom call her. Cathy covered the mouthpiece of the phone and shouted back at her Mom that she would be down in a minute. Then, "I'll talk to you later, Mika."

Cathy hung up after that. I put down my phone and sat

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back on my bed. From the sound of things, Cathy didn't seem as convinced as I was about Trent being the black cougar. Not that I could blame her.

At least she hadn't called me a nut job.

Chapter 14

When I arrived at school Monday morning I half expected to find Trent standing by my locker waiting. When he wasn't, I felt a tiny bit disappointed. The weekend had taken forever to end, or so it had seemed from my perspective. I'd also missed seeing Trent. Other than that I liked him, he'd turned out to be just as good a friend as Cathy.

On the way to Math I had to walk by Silvia and her crew. Both Silvia and Rachel started to giggle the closer I came. Their giggles turned to outright laughter as I walked past them in the hall. I knew they were laughing at me for some reason. Out of the corner of my eye I could see they were looking in my direction. The big question had to be why were they laughing. Not that I really wanted to know or anything.

Sitting down at my usual desk, I waited for Trent to show up. The other kids started showing up in groups or by themselves. By this time, Trent still hadn't made it to class. I started to wonder if he could be sick today. We'd both been drenched to the skin on Saturday. He could have come down

with a cold.

A minute before the bell rang Trent finally put in an appearance. I smiled at him as he headed for the row of desks next to mine, but my smile slowly fell away as he ignored me and walked to the back of the classroom. I quickly turned around in my seat to stare after him. He sat down at the last desk in the row and refused to look my way. He took his Math books out of his backpack and kept his eyes on the top of his desk.

The bell rang just as Mr. Morrison stepped into the classroom and shut the door. I turned back around to face the front of the class. Trent's behavior sat heavily on me. It didn't make any sense. Okay, Saturday had been a little strained near the end, to say the least. I'd honestly thought Trent would have gotten over it by now. Maybe I'd pushed a bit too hard for answers, but who wouldn't have if they had been in my place?

A couple times during the class I thought I felt Trent staring at me, but each time I sneaked a peek behind me he had his head down, working. I wanted nothing more than to get up, go stand in front of his desk, and demand to know what the hell was wrong with him. Of course I didn't do any such thing, but that didn't mean I wouldn't try and talk to Trent before I left to go to my next class.

Once the bell rang I quickly shoved my books into my backpack before heading outside to the hall. I wanted to be out before Trent so I could corner him before he had a chance to get away. He ended up as one of the last ones to leave the

classroom. I moved to block his way before he could walk away.

“Hey, Trent, what’s up?”

Trent didn’t stop, nor did he answer me. He brushed past me as if I didn’t even exist. He didn’t even as much as look me in the face. Not a glance. Nothing. As he walked down the hall I called his name, but he kept going as if I hadn’t shouted for him.

Feeling hurt from Trent’s rejection, I turned around and headed for my next class. I ended up making it with just seconds to spare before the bell rang.

Science passed in a blur. I couldn’t stop thinking about Trent and how he’d acted as if I hadn’t even been there. If he acted this way because of what had happened on Saturday, then at lunch I’d tell him I’d forget everything that had happened. It would drive me a bit insane from not knowing, but I’d willingly sacrifice my sanity if it meant Trent would stop ignoring me. I just wanted things to be as they had been.

I arrived at English prepared to spend most of the class watching the clock. I couldn’t wait for lunch period to start. I had it all planned out. If Trent ignored me, I’d somehow find a way to make him pay attention. I wouldn’t give up on our friendship that easily.

Rachel gave me a smirk as she walked past my desk and sat down at the one directly behind mine. I didn’t give her the satisfaction of showing her I saw her. She was the least of my concerns today.

“Did you enjoy your weekend, weirdo?”

I didn't bother to turn around, and I sure as hell didn't answer her question.

"Oh, come on. You can tell me. Didn't you enjoy your little nature hike on the reservation?"

I spun around in my chair. "What?"

Rachel smirked at me again. "Did you have fun walking around in the rain on Saturday? How long did it take you to finally realize Trent wasn't going to show up? I bet you stood out there for hours." She then laughed as if what she'd said had been a hilarious joke.

Obsessing over Trent for most of the weekend, I hadn't given the note leading me to Okanagan Lake much thought. Somehow I didn't find it all that surprising to learn Silvia, and most likely Rachel, had been responsible for putting it in my locker. It was right up their alley. Both could be vindictive witches at the best of times.

I plastered a smile on my face as I seethed inside. "As a matter of fact Saturday turned out to be a great day. You can tell Silvia her plan backfired. Trent came looking for me when he showed up at my place and found I'd gone to the reservation supposedly to meet up with him. He managed to find me and we spent the rest of the day together."

Rachel's face fell, but she soon pulled herself together. "So Trent and you spent Saturday together? If what you say is true, how come I didn't see you with him before first period, huh?"

"He showed up late this morning."

A condescending smile spread across Rachel's lips. "Is

that what he told you? If he did, he lied. I saw him near the cafeteria way before homeroom started. Hmmm, I wonder if he's finally come to realize how much of a freak you really are."

Determined to not dignify her comment with an answer, I turned back to face the front of the classroom. Just as the teacher arrived, Rachel tried one last time to piss me off.

"Fine, don't tell me. I'll find out for myself when lunch comes around and you're sitting by yourself in the cafeteria—like the loser you are."

Even though I tried not to let Rachel get to me, her words took hold and wouldn't let go. *What will I do if Trent doesn't show up at the cafeteria? He wouldn't actually leave me to the wolves like that, would he?* The seeds of doubt spread before I could stop them.

* * * *

After a quick trip to my locker to get my lunch bag, I hurried to the cafeteria. I tried not to think of the possibility of Trent not being there. I wanted to believe he'd be sitting at our table as he waited for me to arrive, just as he'd done for the first two weeks of school.

I had myself so convinced that, when I stepped into the cafeteria and he wasn't at our table which had been taken over by a bunch of grade eights, it felt as if someone had dropped a great weight on top of me. My steps slowed as I looked to see if Trent sat at another table. Much to my utter disappointment I couldn't see him anywhere.

Feeling as I had on the very first day of school, I kept my

gaze in front of me and sat down at an empty table close to where Trent and I usually sat. Same as the first day, I didn't have a book to read so I focused on eating my lunch and not observing the other kids around me.

Someone knocked into my arm just as I went to take a sip from my juice box. It slipped out of my hand and landed on the table, shooting juice out of the straw and onto the table. I quickly stood it upright and looked over to see who had knocked into me.

Silvia stood beside my chair as she stared down at me with a condescending smile on her face. "I guess Rachel was right. Trent *has* finally come to his senses."

"Just leave me alone, Silvia."

"What's the matter? Did Trent break your heart?"

I turned away to look at a spot on the table. Maybe if I ignored her she'd just go away—but I had no such luck.

"Okay, retard, you can ignore me all you want. You're the one who looks as if you're a brainless idiot, not me. But I *will* say one last thing—don't even think of trying to get Trent back. He's mine now. You had your fun with him, now it's my turn."

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Silvia walk back to the table where Rachel and the rest of her friends sat. *Great*. Now I not only had Trent ditching me, I also had Silvia gunning for me even worse than she had in the past. I didn't know if this day could get any worse than it already had.

While I finished eating my lunch, I found myself scanning the cafeteria every few minutes for Trent. The hope that he'd

come strolling in at any moment slowly died as the minutes ticked by.

Dejected, feeling as if I truly was the weirdo Silvia and her friends called me, I left the cafeteria as soon as I finished eating. The dark looks Silvia sent my way had started to wear on my nerves. Even if I had to hang out at my locker until the end of lunch, it would be a lot better than being stared at by her.

The last two periods of the day proved to be uneventful, which suited me. I felt more than a little down. After the bell rang at the end of the last period, I headed for my locker. On the way there I spotted Trent in the hall, standing near a row of lockers. My heart skipped a beat as he looked up and stared right at me. I smiled at him, but it died when he looked away to focus his attention on the person who stood in front of him.

My steps slowed to a snail's pace when I saw who it was he talked to. Silvia stood in front of Trent with her hand on his broad chest. She had her back turned toward me. Unable to look away, I watched her go up on her tip toes and lock her lips to Trent's. He did nothing to push her away.

Feeling as if someone had sucker-punched me in the gut, I started to breathe in rapid, shallow breaths as I fought to keep my emotions in check. I'd be damned if I let Trent know how much it hurt to see him with Silvia. I wouldn't make a fool of myself by breaking down in tears in the middle of the school's hallway.

I hurried by them with my head held high. Trent's be-

trayal hurt beyond belief. I knew if I didn't get out of the school soon I wouldn't be able to keep it together. At my locker, I quickly threw what I needed into my backpack and practically ran out of the school. Once I got into my car I started to breathe a little easier, but it did nothing to lessen the hurt I felt.

A few times during the drive home I had to wipe the tears I fought to hold back out of my eyes. I forced myself not to think of Trent and Silvia together. It just caused the ache inside me to build.

By the time I made it home I was hanging onto my control by a mere thread. I ran inside the house and up to my bedroom. I heard Mom call my name as I slammed the door shut behind me. I threw myself on my bed and shoved my face into the pillow. Only then did I let the tears that had been building up inside me fall.

I punched the mattress as, inside my head, I screamed *'How could Trent do this to me? How could he dump me for that witch Silvia?'* He'd told me he couldn't stand her. That he hated it that she wanted him. Had it all been a lie? Given how he'd let her kiss him, I had to think it had been.

I cried until I couldn't cry anymore. Trent had been the first boy I had stronger feelings for than a crush. He'd made me feel I wasn't the school freak like I'd become to be called. I actually thought I'd had a chance with him. I thought he had feelings for me as well. The way he'd kissed me, as if he couldn't get enough of me, had to mean I meant something to him.

The Black Cougar of Vernon Secondary

Rolling onto my back, I wiped the tears out of my eyes. If Trent wanted Silvia then they deserved each other. Feeling as if I'd just had my heart ripped out, I sat up on the bed and vowed those would be the last tears I ever cried over Trent. He wasn't worth it.

Chapter 15

I'd just started my laptop when a knock came on my bedroom door. I knew it would be Mom coming to check on me. Using my fingers to straighten my hair, I called for her to come in.

Mom closed the door behind her and came to sit on the edge of my bed. She looked at me with concern. I knew she couldn't miss seeing how red and puffy my eyes had to be from crying. "Hey, kiddo, are you doing okay?"

I shook my head. "Not really."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Something happen with you and Trent?"

I blinked back the tears that burned behind my eyes at the mention of Trent's name. "Yes, but I don't want to talk about it."

Mom reached over and patted my hand. "I'm sorry, kiddo. And here I thought I would be seeing more of Trent. He seemed really concerned about you on Saturday when he

found out where you'd gone. Teenage boys can be so fickle."

"I don't think anybody uses the word 'fickle' nowadays, Mom."

"Would you rather I call them dicks instead?"

My eyes widened and I started to chuckle. "Mom!" Mom rarely, if ever at all, swears around Jared or me.

"What? Just because I don't talk like that all the time doesn't mean I don't know how! Just ask your father. He has first-hand knowledge of my swearing capabilities, especially when I get angry."

I started to laugh. I could just picture Mom swearing up a storm at Dad and him standing there silently taking it. When my parents do have the odd fight, Dad usually lets Mom get all her feelings off her chest first. "Poor Dad."

Mom smiled. "There, I got you to laugh at the expense of your father." She stood up. "I know it hurts right now, Mika, but you'll get over Trent. And I know you don't want to hear this, but try not to let him get to you. You'll find another boy to like."

I nodded, then watched Mom leave. She shut the door behind her. I knew Mom meant well by telling me I'd get over Trent, but at the moment I highly doubted I ever would.

With a sigh, I pulled my laptop onto my lap and went to my email program. Even though I didn't want to discuss what happened at school today with Mom, I had every intention of telling Cathy all about it. I opened a new email and typed out what happened and how I felt. It turned out to be one very long email in the end. Satisfied that I hadn't left anything out,

I hit "Send."

Exactly ten minutes later my computer beeped to let me know I had a new email. It was from Cathy. I started to read and had to shake my head at what Cathy had written. For starters, almost every other word turned out to be a swear word. To say she was angry for me could only be described as an understatement. She called Silvia every nasty word she knew, even calling her a name that rhymed with witch and started with a "B" instead of a "W." Trent, she personally wanted to punch in the nose, or kick him where he would feel it the most, then punch him in the nose.

We spent the next hour exchanging emails. We didn't use the instant messenger because Cathy was supposed to be working on homework. As usual, she had started to get behind in her school work.

After I sent the last email off to Cathy, I turned to look at my window when I heard the first drops of rain start to hit the glass. I had the window open a bit to let in some fresh air. I got up to close it. It had already started to get dark outside. I slid the window shut just as a flash of lightning lit up the sky and the backyard. In that brief flash of light I thought I saw something.

I waited for the lightning to come again. When it did, I moved closer to the window, not believing what I saw. In the very back of the yard, right under the tree fort, sat the black cougar. He stared up at my window. Thunder rumbled as the lightning stopped, throwing the yard into darkness once again.

The Black Cougar of Vernon Secondary

The next time lightning streaked across the sky the black cougar had disappeared. I pressed my nose to the glass, but couldn't see him anywhere in the backyard. I'd only seen him for a few seconds. *Could I have imagined him?*

As I closed my bedroom curtains, I heard Mom call up the stairs that dinner was ready. Not wanting to go down that road where I thought Trent and the black cougar could be one and the same, I left my bedroom. Even if the black cougar *had* been Trent, why would he come to my house? He'd made his feelings perfectly clear today at school. I had to be seeing things that really weren't there. Determined not to let my imagination get away from me, I pushed thoughts of Trent and the black cougar out of my head. It wasn't as if they'd do me any good. It would hurt like hell, but I had to move on, like Mom said. Starting tomorrow, I'd act as if Trent didn't exist. Two could play at that game.

* * * *

The next day at school, I found out being dumped by Trent had gotten me noticed by a few of the boys in my classes. I received more than one interested stare, but one in particular took more of an interest in me than he had in the past.

Jeff Langly was in my Math class. I'd spoken to him a few times when we had Geography together last year. He seemed nice enough, from what little I knew of him. He at least had never treated me as the freak of the school. He also was one of the hotter guys in the school with his light brown hair, blue eyes, and good looks. I probably would have developed a

crush on him last year if I hadn't already been crushing over Trent.

I'd just sat down at my desk when Jeff came and grabbed the one next to mine, the same one Trent had always taken.

"Hey, Mika. How's it going?"

Surprised that Jeff had actually talked to me, I stammered, "Not...not bad."

"Good. Are you enjoying Math so far?"

I rolled my eyes. "Ah, that would be a big fat 'No.'"

Jeff laughed. "I'm glad to see I'm not the only one who hates Math."

"I'm sure we aren't alone," I said with a chuckle.

Trent picked that exact moment to walk into the classroom. I quickly glanced his way, then turned back to Jeff. Out of the corner of my eye I watched Trent walk down the aisle between Jeff's desk and mine. When he reached us, Trent silently stared down at Jeff, giving him a hard look.

Jeff stared back, not backing down an inch. "The desk's already taken. Go sit somewhere else."

Trent's lips thinned into a hard line as he glared at Jeff. I thought for sure Trent would say something, but he didn't. He silently walked away and sat down at an empty desk at the back of the class.

Jeff shook his head. "Man, what the frick is his problem? I thought you two broke up."

"We did," I said softly as I stole a quick glance at Trent. Unlike yesterday, he sat at his desk watching my every move. "Trent was the one who broke things off." I reached up and

touched the mark on my neck. I felt Trent's stare bore into me from across the room.

"Are you sure he wanted to end things between you two? From the look he gave me, and the one he's now giving you, I'm thinking he wants you back."

I turned in my seat, giving Trent more of my back. "Well, he's not getting me back. He made himself perfectly clear that he didn't want anything to do with me any more." I sat up straighter in my chair when the teacher arrived.

Jeff leaned into the aisle and said quietly, "Have lunch with me today, Mika."

Not sure I'd heard Jeff correctly, I asked, "What?"

"I said, have lunch with me today. Since you and Trent are no longer a thing, come and have your lunch in the cafeteria with me."

Not able to think of a single reason why I shouldn't, I nodded. "Sure, why not?"

"Great. I'll meet you outside the cafeteria doors."

A loud snap came from the back of the room. I glanced behind me to find Trent staring at me with a pencil broken in half held in his hand. Even from this short distance away I saw his eyes had lightened to a lighter shade of brown. I turned back around, determined not to let him bug me. He couldn't have heard Jeff asking me to have lunch with him. Jeff had spoken only loud enough for me to hear. Whatever Trent's problem was, he'd just have to get over it.

* * * *

I hurried to my locker—I didn't want to keep Jeff wait-

ing too long. I also wanted to get away from Rachel. During class she'd done nothing but torment me whenever she got the chance. She seemed to take great joy in telling me how Silvia had finally gotten Trent for her own. Rachel then proceeded to tell me about the plans Silvia had made for the weekend for herself and Trent. Even though I vowed to get over Trent, it still hurt to hear how quickly he'd gone over to the other side.

Jeff stood just outside the cafeteria doors as he'd promised. We went inside together and sat down at one of the empty tables. He sat beside me instead of across from me.

We ate in silence for a few minutes before Jeff asked, "What happened to the girl I used to see you eating lunch with all the time last year?"

I swallowed my mouthful of food before I answered him. "Cathy moved away to Vancouver Island over the summer."

"That must bite. You guys seemed close."

I nodded. "Yeah, we were, but we still talk on the phone or on the internet."

"That's good." Jeff looked across the room for a moment, and shook his head. "You've got to be *kidding* me."

"What?"

Jeff jerked his head in the direction of another table. "Trent. He's sitting over there with that bitch Silvia and her friends. Silvia's practically sitting in his lap. Did Trent break things off with you to be with her?"

I looked in the direction Jeff had motioned to. Sure enough, Trent sat with Silvia and her crew about four tables

away. Silvia had her arm around Trent's shoulders and had pressed herself up against his side. It looked as if she had her chest plastered to Trent's arm.

It stung to see Silvia all over Trent, but the way he looked at me with anger showing on his face soon overrode any pain I felt. I knew his anger had to be directed at me, since he looked in my direction and completely ignored Silvia. *Why would Trent be angry with me?* I wasn't the one who dumped him for another guy. But when his gaze moved to Jeff and he looked even more pissed off, it suddenly became crystal clear. Trent didn't like the attention Jeff showed me, and he sure as hell didn't like that Jeff sat with me. *Too bad for him.*

I made a point of ignoring Trent after that and focused my whole attention on Jeff. He turned out to be a great guy. I could talk to him just as easily as I'd been able to talk to Trent. We even liked a lot of the same things. The lunch period flew by. It would have been more enjoyable if Trent hadn't spent the time intently watching me. I didn't look across the room at him, but I could feel his gaze on me. It almost felt as if he touched me physically.

At the end of lunch, Jeff offered to walk me to my locker. As we stood up to leave together, I took one last look at Trent. His eyes seemed to glow for a split second as he curled his upper lip in a snarl. Turning my back, I walked out of the cafeteria with Jeff.

Chapter 16

By the end of the week, I'd just about reached the end of my patience with Trent. During Math and lunch, he did nothing but watch Jeff and me. It got to the point where I almost couldn't take it anymore. It wasn't so much the angry looks he shot Jeff as much as the *possessive* looks he sent in my direction. As if I belonged to him and him alone, which I didn't.

On Friday morning, I found Jeff hanging around outside the Math classroom. When he saw me he called my name and motioned me over. He took my arm and led me a little away from the door.

"What's up, Jeff?" I asked as I gave him a questioning look.

He smiled. "I just wanted to see what you were doing tomorrow night."

I had a feeling something like this was going to come up, but I hadn't expected it to happen so quickly. I liked Jeff, but I didn't know if I wanted him as a boyfriend yet. Even though Trent acted like an ass now, I still hadn't been able to get over

him. Sometimes at night I would have dreams of him and the black cougar, dreams where Trent said I was his, and that he'd never leave me. It wouldn't be really fair to Jeff if I started seeing him when I still had feelings for Trent.

Sensing my hesitation, Jeff said, "I know it hasn't been that long since you and Trent broke up. I just wanted to see if you would go see a movie with me tomorrow night. That's it. Nothing else."

"I don't know, Jeff. I still haven't gotten over Trent."

"It wouldn't be as if I'm asking you out. Think of it as one friend asking another out for a bit of fun on the weekend. Please, Mika. Plus it'll be a chance to show Trent you've moved on. It isn't as if he gave a crap about your feelings when he dumped you and went right to Silvia afterwards."

Jeff had a point there. *Why shouldn't I go out and enjoy myself?* Given time, I could see myself falling for Jeff. He was tall, good looking, a nice guy, and someone I could easily talk to. What else could I ask for in a boyfriend? The only thing holding me back was that I didn't have as strong feelings for Jeff as I had for Trent. With Trent, I wanted to wrap myself around him and burrow my way under his skin. And when he'd kissed me, I wanted more, so much more.

I slowly nodded. "Okay, you've convinced me. Just remember it isn't a date. We're only going out as friends."

"It's a deal. I'll pick you up sometime after six tomorrow night. That should give us enough time to catch the first show."

"Sounds good." I rattled off my address as Jeff wrote it

down on a piece of paper in his binder.

“Oh, and before I forget, I won’t be around at lunch. I’ve got a dentist appointment. Sorry, you’re going to have to sit alone today.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I quickly reassured him. “I’ll be fine. Are you coming back after your appointment?”

“No. My brother and sister are going as well. There won’t be much time left of school once we all get our teeth checked. So I get the whole afternoon off.”

“Must be nice.”

Jeff put his arm around my shoulders and started to lead me to class. “Hey, I’d gladly let you take my place at the dentist.”

“Ah, no thanks. Having *my* dentist poke away in my mouth is enough for me. I don’t need yours doing it as well.”

Jeff laughed. “I guess I’m stuck having to go then.”

I laughed with him, but my laughter slowly faded away when I saw Trent standing at the classroom door. He watched us as a mixture of hurt and anger played across his face. As if I’d done something to hurt *him*. Jeff’s arm still hung around my shoulders. At first I thought to push Jeff away, but at the last second I stopped myself. I wasn’t doing anything wrong.

Once Jeff and I reached the classroom door, Trent stepped in front of us. He scowled at me. I scowled back at him. When Trent still didn’t move out of our way, I said what I’d been dying to say all week. “Now you know what it feels like.”

Trent’s scowl disappeared. He opened his mouth as if to

say something in return, but instead he closed it with a snap and moved out of the way. I turned away from him and let Jeff walk me into the room.

* * * *

The sound of Silvia's voice raised in anger caused me to look up from the book I'd been reading. More than one head in the cafeteria turned to look her way.

Silvia's face had turned red with anger as she stood beside the chair Trent sat in and shouted. Obviously Silvia hadn't liked it that Trent had gone to sit at another table by himself rather than sit with her. Trent crossed his arms over his chest and glared up at her, not saying a word. Silvia continued to ream him out. With her first loud outburst, the cafeteria had quieted enough that almost everyone could hear what she yelled at him next.

"Answer me, Trent. Are you going to sit with me or not?" Silvia ranted.

Trent didn't say anything. He slowly turned away from Silvia and gazed over at me. I stiffened when Silvia's furious gaze locked onto me for a few seconds and then went back to Trent. This was so not good.

Silvia slammed the palm of her hand on the table in front of Trent. "Look at me goddamn it when I talk to you!" When Trent slowly turned his head to look up at her, she raised her voice even louder. "Is it because of the freak? Don't think I haven't noticed how you've stared at her all week. You should be staring at *me*, not the freak of nature over there!"

I stiffened even more as Silvia pointed her finger in my

direction. Now *I'd* become the center of attention as all eyes turned my way.

Trent's continued silence seemed to infuriate Silvia even more. With a shriek of rage, she turned away from Trent and stomped over to my table. Before I had a chance to react, Silvia grabbed my lunch and threw it on the floor. She then proceeded to grind it to a pulp with the heel of her shoe. She snatched my book out of my hand and ripped the pages out of it. After she threw my demolished book at me, she stomped out of the cafeteria.

Shocked by what Silvia had done, I sat frozen in my chair. It wasn't until someone began to snicker that I found myself able to move. With my eyes downcast, I gathered up the pages of my ripped book and shoved them into my backpack. Still the center of attention, but not in a good way, I felt my face go red with embarrassment. I stood, unable to look at what Trent's reaction had been to Silvia's temper tantrum, and quickly headed for the cafeteria doors. My lunch I figured the custodian would have to clean it up. I wouldn't be hanging around long enough to fix the mess Silvia had made.

Even though it had started to rain, I went outside. I headed for the tree Trent and I had once sat under. Fighting back tears of anger and embarrassment, I let myself slide down the trunk until I sat on the damp ground. I drew great gulps of air into my lungs as I tried to calm down.

By the time I'd pulled myself together, my hair and clothes were damp with rain. *Why did Trent set me up like that?* He had to have known it would only set Silvia off even more

when he'd looked over at my table. And it wasn't that he just *looked* at me. He'd looked at me with *longing* in his eyes. If *I'd* seen it then Silvia had to have seen it too. I had to wonder if Trent had done it out of spite for what had gone on between us this morning. I didn't want to think Trent could be so mean.

With a deep breath I forced myself to get up. Next period would be starting soon. For a brief second I thought of going home, but then I decided against it. I'd be damned if I'd let Silvia chase me away from school with my tail between my legs. I could make it through the rest of the day. Come Monday, Jeff would be back and Silvia wouldn't be able to single me out as she'd done today.

Running through the rain, I headed back inside the school. After I stepped inside, I drew up short when I found Trent standing beside the door. His hair and clothes were wet as well, as if he too had gone outside in the rain.

He looked down at me, concern showing in his eyes. "Mika."

My temper flared. *How dare he look at me like that when he's responsible for what had happened? He's got some nerve!* I let all the anger I felt for him rise up inside me so it showed in my eyes. Trent sucked in a breath and took a step back as if I'd hit him. Satisfied I'd gotten my message across, I walked away without a backward glance. That would be the last time I ever let Trent hurt me like that.

Chapter 17

When Saturday evening rolled around I was more than ready for the distraction of going out to see a movie with Jeff. I hadn't slept well the night before, and my thoughts were jumbled at best.

My night had been spent mostly dreaming about Trent, but also about cougars—the black and the grey-brown cats. I blamed it on my overactive imagination. Before I'd gone to bed last night I'd looked out my bedroom window. Since I'd thought I'd seen the black cougar in the backyard that one time, I couldn't seem to stop myself from checking to see if he'd show up again. Last night when I checked, it wasn't the black cougar I thought I saw, but the one that had stalked me in the clearing on the reservation.

At least I thought it had been the same one. It most definitely was a male as that one had been, but he seemed a bit bigger than the one from the clearing. I'd had long enough to get a pretty good look at him before he took off.

The only difference between this cougar's visit and the

black cougar's was the way this one seemed to size me up. When he'd caught my gaze through the window, the big cat had opened his mouth, giving me a good view of his sharp teeth. I jumped away from the window at that point. After I'd worked up the courage to look out the window again, I couldn't see him anywhere.

Not knowing whether I'd started to hallucinate or not, I'd gone to bed after I'd made sure my window had been locked tight. That turned out to be a mistake.

I had no problem falling asleep. It was the images of the cats fighting over me that turned my dreams into nightmares. I woke up in the morning able to remember them in detail. One in particular got to me more than the others. In that nightmare the cougars fought and the black cougar ended up defeated. Somehow I found myself standing on the sidelines watching the fight. When it was over the other cougar turned his sights on me. Too afraid to move, I stood frozen as the cougar stalked closer. His gold-eyed gaze locked with mine, making me feel as if I'd become his prey. I woke up with a scream trapped in my throat as the cougar launched himself and sank his teeth deep into my neck, taking me down to the ground.

Throughout the day, time and time again I found myself pondering my dreams from the night before. When I started to freak myself out from thinking about the cougar dragging me down to the ground, blood gushing out of the wound in my throat, I had to tell myself it hadn't been real. Neither animal had really been in my backyard. They didn't just walk in-

to a residential area like where I lived and make themselves at home. Wild cougars were supposed to be more afraid of man than we are of them. Weren't they? And if one had actually come to be in my backyard, I'd hardly be the only one to see him. There surely would have been other witnesses. It would've been all over the news and in the newspapers if someone else had seen either cougar.

More than ready to have a night out, I met Jeff at the door when he arrived just after six that evening. Of course I had to introduce him to Mom and Dad before we left. Luckily Dad didn't keep us long.

The introductions over, Jeff walked me outside to a van parked in the driveway. He opened the passenger's door and closed it after I settled into the seat. He came around the driver's side and started the engine.

"Now no cracks about the van," Jeff said as he started to back out of the driveway. "It's my Mom's. My Dad's the one with the sportier car, but he won't let me drive it so I'm stuck with the family-obile."

"Hey," I said with a laugh, "you don't hear me complaining."

"Good. So what movie do you want to see?"

"I don't know. I'm open to anything just so long as it isn't a horror movie." I didn't need anymore nightmares keeping me awake at night.

"Okay. That narrows it down a bit. How about that new action movie? I don't think I can sit through a chick flick. I'd probably fall asleep through it."

I laughed again. "Then the action movie it is."

Jeff cleared his throat. "Ah, I kind of heard what happened yesterday during lunch with Silvia."

Terrific. "Oh." I kept my gaze out the front window.

Jeff took my hand and squeezed it. "Sorry I wasn't there to stop the bitch from taking a hissy fit on you."

I turned to look at Jeff's profile. "Don't worry about it. I'll survive."

He gave my hand another squeeze before he put his back on the steering wheel. "She really needs for someone to permanently put her in her place. What I don't get is why Trent just sat there and let Silvia do that to you. Yeah, I know you two aren't going out anymore, but if something like that happened to one of my ex-girlfriends, I would've stood up for her."

"I guess Trent didn't care one way or the other."

"The guy still needs a kick in the ass for it."

I knew Jeff was only trying to make me feel better, but it wasn't helping. I didn't want to think about yesterday's lunch, and I sure didn't want to think about Trent while out with Jeff. "Let's talk about something else, okay? I'd really rather forget the whole thing."

"Sorry." Jeff gave me a quick smile before he turned his attention back to the road. "I promise I won't talk about Trent and his bitch girlfriend any more tonight."

We arrived at the movie theatre with plenty of time to spare. After Jeff bought our tickets, and we found two seats in the middle of the theatre, he went and bought us both

some pop and popcorn. I offered to pay for my own, Dad had given me money before Jeff had arrived, but Jeff refused to take any.

The movie didn't turn out to be half bad with plenty of action and an explosive chase scene at the end. Once it was over we filed out with the rest of the people in the theatre. Jeff raved about the special effects and the numerous explosions that had taken place in the movie. We then started to compare other action movies we'd seen to this one.

I think we talked about most of the great action movies by the time Jeff pulled into the driveway of my house. He put the van in park and came around to the passenger side. I got out of the van and smiled up at him. "Thanks for convincing me to go out with you tonight. I had a good time."

"I'm glad you did, Mika. We should do it again soon."

Jeff moved closer. Our gazes collided. From the intense way Jeff looked down at me I had the feeling he wanted to kiss me.

"Ah, Jeff, remember this wasn't supposed to be a date."

"I know, but that doesn't mean you can't give your friend a simple kiss and a hug. Think of it as a nice way of saying 'Thanks for the great evening.' Just a quick peck on the lips, that's all I'm asking for."

I shook my head and smiled. "Fine, just a quick kiss and hug."

Jeff opened his arms. I stepped into his embrace as he pulled me closer and brought his lips down to mine. The kiss lingered a little bit longer than what would be considered a

peck before he pulled me even closer for a hug. It felt nice, but it wasn't Trent. I hated that I did it, but I couldn't help but compare Jeff's embrace to Trent's. Trent had held me as if he never wanted to let me go.

A sound that sounded suspiciously like a cougar's roar ripped through the night air. Jeff lifted his head to stare at the field across the street, where the sound had come from. The field was the only piece of property that didn't have houses on it on my street. It had been slated for a proposed school, but the school board had yet to build one.

"What the hell was that," Jeff asked.

Quickly I thought up another explanation for the sound other than what it actually could be. "Oh, that would be our neighbor across the street. They like to listen to the television really loud with the window open." I cringed inside. That excuse sounded pretty lame even to me.

"Okay. To each his own I guess." Jeff dropped his arms and took a step back. "I should let you go inside. I had a great time, Mika. I guess I'll see you at school on Monday."

I nodded. "Thanks again for the movie."

I waited until Jeff had driven out of sight before I headed across the street. I didn't know what I'd find in the field, if anything. I just knew I had to see what had made the roaring sound.

The grass and weeds in the field hadn't been cut for a while. It came practically up to my knees. My eyes had long since adjusted to the darkness, but I still couldn't see too far in front of me. The sound of a low growl reached my ears as I

walked farther into the field. It sounded as if it had come from somewhere in front of me.

Probably not the smartest thing to do if it turns out to be an actual cougar out here in the field. I said quietly, "Come on, show yourself. No more playing hide and seek."

One minute I stood in the middle of the field and then the next I landed on the ground on my back with a very warm, hard body pressed down on top of me. I gasped as I looked up into Trent's eyes. In the darkness I couldn't see what color his eyes were, but from the feral expression on his face I had a feeling they wouldn't be brown.

I pushed at his chest, but Trent didn't budge. "Get off."

"No." That one word sounded very close to a cat's growl. "Did you have a good time with Jeff?"

I narrowed my eyes at Trent. "Were you spying on me? How dare you!"

"Well, did you?"

"That's none of your goddamn business."

Trent growled low in his throat. He pulled the collar back on my long-sleeved t-shirt and put his hand on top of the black cougar's bite mark. It had healed, but it had left a purplish scar behind. "I marked you as mine. That alone says it's very much my business."

I gasped again. Before I could say another word, Trent slammed his mouth down on mine. His lips slanted across my lips, his kiss desperate and hard. I moaned as my body got swept away on a roller-coaster ride of sensations. But then I remembered everything Trent had done. I shouldn't be en-

joying his kiss.

I shoved at his chest, which only caused him to hold me tighter. In another bid to free myself, I reached up and grabbed his long hair. I yanked it as hard as I could until Trent had no choice but to lift his head or risk losing a handful. I continued to pull on it as I pushed him off. Once he rolled free, I got up on my knees and glared at him. My chest rose and fell as if I'd just run a marathon. My traitorous body wanted nothing more than to throw itself back in Trent's arms.

With the back of my hand I wiped my mouth. Trent slowly pushed himself up until he sat on the ground in front of me. "You can't do this, Trent. I'm not yours. You made your choice when you went to Silvia. You think I want anything to do with you after you did that?"

Trent reached out as if to touch my cheek.

I slapped his hand away. "Don't."

He groaned then scrubbed his face with his hands. "I've screwed this up royally."

What Trent had said, about his marking me as his, slowly sank in. I reached up and put my hand on the mark on my neck. Trent's gaze followed my movement.

"What did you say?" I asked softly.

Trent turned to look at me. "I said I screwed things up with you."

"No, I mean before. You said you marked me." I rubbed my hand along the bite mark.

"Forget I said that. I should never have come out here."

He moved as if to stand, but my next words stopped him.

"You're the black cougar." A muscle twitched along Trent's jaw. "You can sit there and not say a word, but I know I'm right. Your eyes change to gold. And not to mention that day on the reservation when the black cougar chased away the other one. You suddenly appeared after he took off." At his continued silence I shook my head. "Come on, Trent. I'm not stupid. I know what I saw. I can put two and two together. I've been driving myself crazy about this whole thing, thinking I must be out of my head for even believing you could shape-shift into the black cougar. But then I saw you that night in my backyard. And then last night I saw the other cougar—"

Trent cut me off before I could finish the sentence. "*What?* Where did you see the other cougar?"

"In my backyard. It looked sort of like the one you chased away, but I think this one could have been slightly bigger."

Trent swore under his breath as his brows drew together. "Craig." In one fluid motion, he stood up and started to walk out of the field.

I caught up with him and pulled him to a stop. "You are so *not* going to do this again. Didn't you hear what I said? At least tell me I'm right."

With a sigh, Trent turned to face me. "Mika, I promise to explain everything to you, but not right now. I have something to do. I'll come by tomorrow and pick you up. I'll tell you everything then."

When he would have touched my cheek again I took a

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step back and shook my head. “Who says I want you to come by tomorrow?”

Chapter 18

A look of confusion passed across Trent's face. "I thought you wanted answers."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I do, but that doesn't mean things are going to go back to the way they once were."

With a pained expression, Trent said. "I never meant to hurt you, Mika. I did it with your best interests in mind."

"My best interests?" I shouted. "So let me get this straight. You thought it would be better for me to watch you go off and take up with Silvia? You know how I feel about her. Bad enough you acted as if I didn't exist, but to have to watch you lock lips with that witch..." I had to stop and take a deep breath as tears threatened to rise to the surface. "Yesterday took the cake, though. How could you've just sat there and let Silvia do that to me?"

Moving faster than I thought possible, Trent had my face cupped in his hands in a blink of an eye. "I told you before, I screwed up. I only went to Silvia to save you. I knew doing that would be the one sure way to make it so you wouldn't

want anything to do with me anymore.”

“But why? To save me from what?”

Trent lowered his head until our foreheads touched and closed his eyes. “To save you from me.”

Before I could ask Trent to explain what exactly he meant by that, Dad opened the front door of the house and called my name. He stood in the light spilling out of the open doorway as he cast his gaze around the front yard. Trent pulled away and disappeared into the darkness.

Feeling more confused than ever, I headed toward the house. “I’m here, Dad,” I called.

Dad stood with his arms crossed over his chest as he watched me cross the street. “What were you doing over there?”

Obviously Dad hadn’t seen Trent. “I thought I saw something.”

“How can you see anything? The field’s almost completely pitch dark.”

“I thought I just saw something. Okay?” I snapped.

Dad backed up to let me inside. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you angry. How was the movie?” He shut the door behind us.

“Pretty good. It’s getting late. I think I’ll head up to bed now.”

“All right. I’ll see you in the morning then.”

Inside my room, I changed into my pajamas—a pair of pink pajama bottoms with the word “princess” in red printed all over them, and a pink, long-sleeved t-shirt that matched. I

covered my mouth as I yawned. The lack of sleep from the night before, and the turmoil of emotions Trent had stirred inside me, had suddenly caught up with me. I wanted nothing more than to crawl into my bed and sleep for a year.

Before I got into bed I went over to the window and pulled the curtain aside. When I looked down at the yard, I caught the dark silhouetted shape of the black cougar. He had his nose to the ground, sniffing where the other cougar had been the night before. As if he sensed me watching, he lifted his head and looked right up at my window. I pressed my hand to the glass. We stood and stared at each other for a few seconds before he sniffed the ground a few more times and then disappeared into the shadows.

I pulled the curtain shut and turned off the light. As I got into bed I sighed. I had no idea what I'd do if Trent showed up at the house tomorrow. A part of me wanted to give him the chance to explain, to have him back in my life. But I didn't know if I could do it. He'd hurt me once. I didn't know if I could ever trust him not to do it again.

* * * *

I slept like a baby until eleven the next morning then laid in bed until almost noon. After the confrontation with Trent last night, I wasn't too keen on facing the day. I still didn't know if I wanted to go anywhere with him or not.

Mom knocked on my bedroom door once, then opened it. "Are you going to get out of bed any time soon?"

Rolling over onto my back, I pulled the covers up higher under my chin. "Do I have to?"

Mom sighed. "How can you lie around in bed for so long? If I did that I'd have a sore back."

I shrugged. "I'm a teenager. Aren't I supposed to sleep in really late?"

Mom chuckled. "I guess you are. Just try and get out of bed before dinner time. At the very least, come down and have something to eat soon."

After Mom closed my door, I snuggled in deeper under the covers. I must have dozed off again, because I woke up to someone knocking on my door again. Thinking it had to be Jared this time, I shouted, "Go away, dumb ass. I'm trying to sleep." I rolled over onto my side and pulled the covers over my head.

The next thing I knew the covers were yanked off me. With a shriek of outrage, I rolled onto my back ready to blast Jared for actually daring to come into my room, let alone do what he'd done. The words froze in my throat. It wasn't Jared who stood in my room but Trent. Even though my pajamas covered me as well as my clothes did, I shrieked and crossed my arms over my chest.

"Trent! What are you doing in my bedroom?"

He flashed me a crooked smile. "I'm making you get out of bed. What else would I be doing?"

My mouth opened and closed a couple of times as I tried to get past the fact that Trent actually stood in my room. "How...how did you get past my parents? I know my Dad wouldn't just let you come up here."

Trent chuckled. "Your parents are downstairs talking to

my Dad. Your Mom was the one who said I could come up here and get you out of bed.”

I sat up. “Why is your Dad here? And I can’t see my Mom just letting you waltz up here. She knows you dumped...” I let my words trail off.

“That I dumped you? I think when my Dad and I showed up at your door a little while ago, and had a little talk with your parents, they came to realize it’s all just a misunderstanding between us.”

“A misunderstanding? I would hardly call what you did a simple misunderstanding!”

“Look, I’m not going to get into this with you right now. Get up and get dressed so we can leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Trent moved closer to the bed and leaned down until he was right in my face. “Yes, you are. My Dad’s already okayed it with your parents. So get up and get dressed or I’m going to throw you over my shoulder right now and you can leave in your pajamas. Which will it be?”

I ground my teeth together. “All right. I’ll get dressed, but not until you get out of my room.”

“Good girl. I’ll be out in the hallway, waiting.”

Grumbling about pushy males, I quickly dressed in a pair of jeans and a sweat top. I could have done with a shower, but I settled for pulling a brush through my hair. I opened my bedroom door and pointedly ignored Trent as I marched to the bathroom to brush my teeth. I slammed the bathroom door in his face.

Through the door, Trent said, "I'm starting to get the impression you aren't a morning person, Mika."

I didn't respond to that comment. I took my time brushing my teeth. I had to use the toilet. Since Trent stood on the other side of the door, able to hear everything, I turned the water on hard in the sink and went about my business. I yanked open the bathroom door and glared at Trent. He motioned for me to go first, then followed me downstairs.

Just as Trent had said, his Dad sat in the living room talking to both Mom and Dad. They all stood when Trent and I entered the room. I couldn't help but notice how Trent's father towered over mine. He seemed to fill most of the living room.

Mom was the first one to speak. "Well, I see Trent managed to do what I couldn't."

I gave Mom a stare that said I wasn't impressed.

"Don't stare at me like that, Mika. Trent and his Dad have made plans to spend the day with you. I think you should go."

I shot a look at Dad. He nodded his head in agreement with what Mom had said. "Whose side are you guys on anyway?"

"We're not on anybody's side," Mom said.

Grumpily I shot back, "Well, I think you're both traitors."

Trent's Dad bit back a laugh. "Your parents haven't betrayed you, Mika. Trent would just like the chance to explain a few things to you."

From the pointed look Trent's Dad gave me, I knew exactly what he meant. He wasn't referring to Trent dumping me to take up with Silvia, even though I bet that's what he'd told Mom and Dad.

My curiosity got the better of me. Here was my chance to have all my questions answered. I nodded. "Okay, fine. I'll go with you, though I'm not thrilled about this."

Trent walked beside me as we all walked to the front door. I wondered if he thought he had to stay close to me in case I decided to run back up to my bedroom and barricade myself inside.

Once Mom and Dad said goodbye to Trent's Dad, we headed out to his car. I got into the back seat and slammed the door shut before Trent could even think of joining me. He only shook his head. He went and sat up in the front with his Dad.

I waited until we were well away from my house before I spoke. "All right, spill. You got me out of the house, so start talking."

Trent's Dad started to chuckle and shot Trent a quick look. "Boy, she does like to get right to the point, doesn't she?"

"That she does."

"Hello," I said. "I'm sitting right here in the car, you know."

Trent turned part way around in his seat. "Just relax, Mika. You'll get all your answers after we get there."

"And where would *there* be exactly?"

“We decided, my Dad and I that is, that it would be best if we took you to see my Grandfather. He knows our family history better than anybody. He’ll be able to answer any questions you may have.”

I didn’t know if that was a good or bad thing. I’d a feeling I’d be getting more than I asked for. It also made me wonder how Trent’s Grandfather would react about an outsider learning of the family secret.

The paved roads turned into gravel roads when we reached reservation land. I sat in silence and watched the scenery go by. All too soon, Trent’s Dad pulled into the driveway of a small bungalow. Trent opened the back door and waited for me to get out before we joined his Dad at the front door of the bungalow. For some reason I started to feel anxious, as if I’d gotten into something over my head.

The door opened after Trent’s Dad knocked. An older man, who looked remarkably like Trent and his Dad, stood in the doorway as he greeted us. His gaze lingered on me before he motioned for us to come inside. He then led us to the small living room. Trent took my hand and pulled me to sit down on the couch with him. His Dad and Grandfather sat in the two armchairs across from us.

“So this must be Mika,” Trent’s Grandfather said to the room at large.

I nodded as I looked at him. He wasn’t as old as I thought he would be. For being someone’s grandfather, he looked pretty spry. I’d expected him to be old and frail, though why I thought that, I’d no idea. It wasn’t as if both my grandfathers

were old and frail. The only thing that marked him as the eldest male Hunter was the streaks of grey in his long hair and the small array of lines on his face.

Trent's grandfather gave me a wink as if he knew I'd been checking him out. "Did my son and grandson tell you why they brought you here?"

I cleared my throat. "Yeah, sorta. Trent said you'd answer all my questions about the..." I left my words hanging.

"About the black cougar." He said it as a statement, not as a question.

"Yeah," I answered softly.

"Good. Trent has told me you'd figured out the connection between him and the black cougar you encountered at the lake. Very observant. Not too many people would have been able to do that. Most people would be more concerned about coming face to face with what they thought was a wild cougar, rather than trying to look past it to see what it truly is."

"So Trent's really the black cougar? He's never come out and admitted it."

Trent's grandfather smiled and nodded. "That he is, my girl."

Even though I'd known it, now it had actually been said out loud, I felt my heart start to pound against my ribs. I licked my suddenly-dry lips. "How? How is it possible that a person can shape-shift into a big cat?"

"Well, if you want to look at it from our family's history—what has been passed down from generation to genera-

tion—the story goes that a thousand years ago one of our ancestors took a male cougar as her mate. The sons from that union were born human, but had the ability to take on their father’s form as well. They passed this ability onto their sons, and they onto theirs, and so on and so on.”

“So is it just *your* family that can shape-shift, or can other families in your tribe do it as well? Because I’m pretty sure the other cougar I saw wasn’t your typical wild cougar either.”

Trent’s grandfather smiled and looked at Trent. “You weren’t kidding when you said much wouldn’t get past her.” He then turned back to me. “You’re right. The other cougars, the one you saw at the lake and the one in your backyard, are shape-shifters as well. There are only four families in our tribe with this ability. We’re all descended from that one ancestor.”

“You said only the males can shape-shift. Does that mean you two can shape-shift too?” I looked from Trent’s grandfather to his father and back again.

His grandfather nodded. “Yes, both my son and I have the ability, as does Trent.”

My breath left my lungs in a rush. “Oh, boy. Talk about fairy tales coming to life. Can you all shape-shift into *black* cougars?”

Trent, who’d sat silently beside me until now, spoke up. “No. Only I can shift into a black cougar. And because of that, I tried to save you from me before it became too late.”

Chapter 19

I turned on the couch so I could pin Trent with a gaze. “Okay, you keep saying you have to save me from you. Would you please for once tell me what you mean?”

“It’s because I can shape-shift into the black cougar. It’s rare. Only one male in our family every hundred years or so is born with the black cougar inside him.”

“And?”

“I’m getting there,” Trent assured me. “Being the black cougar marks me differently than it does the others. The cat is stronger in me. The cat rules me as much as the human side does.”

“And?”

Trent blew out a deep breath. “How to word this so you don’t run screaming out of the room? Okay. You have to know I want you as my girlfriend.” Trent held up his hand to stop me when I opened my mouth to speak. “Don’t even say it, Mika. I already told you why I did what I did. As I was saying, I want to be with you, but the cat part of me wants some-

thing more permanent than merely being boyfriend and girlfriend. He wants you as his mate.”

That, I hadn’t been expecting. “As in mated for life kinda thing?”

“Yeah. That’s why I bit you on the neck when I was in cat form. It’s a mark to show you’re my mate, that you’re taken and that I’ll fight off any male who dares to claim what’s mine.”

A shiver of awareness ran down my spine. A part of me wanted to throw myself at Trent and bite him to leave *my* mark, claiming him as mine. I forced myself to remain where I sat. “Is it just that the cat wants me as his mate, or does the boy as well?”

His eyes flashed gold for a split second before they returned to brown. “He mostly definitely wants you as well.”

Trent’s Grandfather cleared his throat. “What Trent has failed to tell you is that the male who can shift into the black cougar will seek to be mated at a younger age than most. Once he’s found the one for him, the cat will ride him until he’s tied her to him. Be it through a verbal commitment, or another way.”

Without taking my gaze off Trent, I asked, “And if this girl doesn’t want to be claimed as his mate? What happens then?”

“Then the cat could become more aggressive,” Trent said. “Try to take control of me so he can seek to claim his mate on his own. The fight for control can be...a strain—to say the least.”

I reached over to Trent and smacked him in the chest. "You idiot. If you know that'll happen then why put yourself through it by pushing me away?"

"Because you're only seventeen and you have years before you have to make a decision about who you want to find yourself permanently hooked up with."

I gave him another smack. "So? You're only seventeen, too. And it's not as if we have to run out and get married tomorrow, you dolt."

Trent rubbed his chest. "Quit smacking me."

"Then quit being such an idiot. You've not once asked me how I felt about you. As for the whole teenage romance thing, I know for a fact some of them work even into adulthood. My parents are living proof of that. They first started dating in high school."

"I don't think you understand the consequences, Mika."

"What could the consequences be? I like you and you like me. It can't get much more complicated than that."

Trent's dad spoke before Trent could reply. "Mika, I think what Trent is worried about is what would happen if you ever decided to break up with him."

I focused my attention on Trent's dad. "What would happen?"

"Once a black cougar gets a commitment from his mate, there never will be another for him. He mates for life. Even if you left Trent he would never be able to take another as his mate."

Oh, no pressure there. "I see."

Trent moved closer on the couch and picked up my hand before he said, "That's why I tried to put some space between us. I never meant to hurt you, but I didn't know what else to do. Things hadn't gone so far as to have my cat demanding I take the choice from you. Though I have to say having to watch you with Jeff at school all week, and then knowing you went out with him last night, didn't exactly help matters."

"Like I said before, if you'd taken the time to ask how I felt in the first place all this could have been avoided. If it's a commitment you want, then—"

Trent put his hand over my mouth before I could finish. "Don't say anything right now. You need time to think this over."

I pulled his hand away. "Okay. In that case, no more avoiding me at school. I want to start over again. There's no reason why we can't have lunch together. Actually I want it that way."

"What about your buddy Jeff? If you're still going to sit with him at lunch I can't be with you. He's a rival. The cat's first instinct will be to get you away from him, by any means possible."

"Not a problem. I'm sure Jeff will understand when I explain we've decided to patch things up."

Trent crossed his arms across his broad chest. "I'm not so sure about that. You kissed him, after all."

I shook my head. "No, *Jeff* kissed me. I made it perfectly clear when I said I'd go to the movies with him that it wasn't a date, and that I hadn't gotten over you yet."

The words had barely left my mouth before Trent pulled me to him and hugged me to his chest. I smacked his back. "Air. Air would be nice right about now." My voice came out muffled with my face pressed to his chest.

Trent's grandfather chuckled. "I can see Mika will be able to hold her own against our boy here."

Reluctantly, Trent let me sit back up. I looked over at his dad. "I take it that's a good thing?"

"Yes. Given what Trent is, he'll tend to be overprotective of you. You'll have to be able to put him in his place if he gets out of hand. He has the natural tendency to lead. He was born to be a leader. If we still lived on the reservation—"

Trent cut off his dad before he could continue. "Enough, Dad. I think I'll take Mika out for a walk while you visit with Grandpa." He stood and pulled me up so I stood next to him.

His grandfather stopped us before we could leave. "Just make sure you bring Mika back in time so I can have a visit with her as well. Once this all sinks in, she may have some more questions for me."

Trent nodded then led me outside.

* * * *

We walked around to the back of the house and then down a small slope. Trent held my hand as we walked in silence. I'd had most of my questions answered about what Trent was, but it also raised some more. Some that I didn't really want to discuss with either Trent's dad or his grandfather. They were questions I wanted Trent to answer himself.

At the bottom of the slope stood a large willow tree with

the branches hanging so low they almost touched the ground. Trent walked me over to it. He pushed the branches aside and sat down at the bottom of the tree. I moved to sit beside him. It felt very sheltered under the tree with the branches all around us.

“Well?” Trent asked.

“Well, what?”

“You’re too quiet. That means you’re thinking about something.”

“What do you expect? It’s a lot to take in.”

He turned his head so he could look me in the face. “But you’re able to accept it?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I think so. Can you do something for me?”

“Sure.”

“Can you shape-shift into the black cougar now? I want to watch you when you shift.”

Trent chuckled and shook his head. “After everything you were told, especially what I want from you, and all you can think about is seeing me shift?”

“Well, yeah. I’ve seen you in your cat form, but I’ve never seen you make the actual change. For one thing it’ll definitely bring home what I learned here today.”

Trent moved a small distance away. “If it’ll make you happy. And you don’t have to be frightened. I’m still inside there. I’ll be able to understand you.”

I moved away from the trunk of the tree and sat so I faced Trent. His eyes lightened to gold with the pupils turn-

ing to slits as the outline of his body started to blur and glow. In a matter of seconds the black cougar appeared in Trent's place. I smiled as he took a step closer and purred. I reached out to stroke the top of his head and down his neck. He seemed to like that because his purrs grew louder.

He stuck his face into the crook of my neck and sniffed before he dragged his raspy tongue against my skin. I giggled as I pushed his face away. "Your whiskers tickle."

I ran my hand down his back. His black fur felt soft to the touch. I looked into his gold eyes. I couldn't mistake the intelligence that lurked inside them. Trent definitely was still in there somewhere. He sat back on his haunches and looked back at me. I ran my hand down his back one last time before I moved back.

"You can shift back now if you want."

Just like when he'd shifted to his cat form, his body blurred and glowed before Trent took the cat's place. "Thanks for showing me."

Trent caressed my cheek with the back of one of his fingers. "Any time, but I don't think I should do that too much around you until you've made your decision. It kind of excites the cat, if you know what I mean."

"Ah, got ya." I moved to sit with my back against the willow tree. Trent sat next to me and took my hand. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"What about the other cougar I saw in my backyard? You said Craig's name when I first told you about it. What would

he be doing in my backyard? If it really was Craig.”

Trent clenched his jaw together until the muscles along it jumped. He growled deep in his throat. “It was Craig, all right. I smelled his scent all over your backyard.”

“So that was what you did last night after I went inside. You were checking out the scent of the other cougar.”

“It’s because of what you mean to me. He saw my mark on your neck. He must have followed my scent trail to your house.”

“But why?”

“Because he’s a prick. An insecure prick at that. He hates me. It’s because of him and how he always went after me that my dad made the decision to move us off the reservation.”

“Why would he hate you so much?”

“It’s because of what I am, and what he isn’t. Once we reached the age of ten we were able to shift for the first time. When I made my first shift, it was then my family found out I was the ‘special’ one. It pissed Craig off to no end. Before we could shift, he used to brag about how he would be the black cougar. He was always the bigger one of the two of us. Because it turned out to be me instead, he decided to make my life a living hell.”

“You’re bigger than he is now.”

“That’s just another notch against me in Craig’s books. You see, as the black cougar I’m supposed to be the leader of the rest. Cougars don’t travel in packs like wolves, so there has to be one of us that can keep the others in line. When my family moved off the reservation, Craig took on the position

of leader in my place. He knows it's rightfully mine, but he won't give it up without a fight. Not that I've ever challenged him for it."

"So what are we going to do about him then? What should we do if he shows up in my backyard again?"

"*You* aren't going to do anything. If it comes to it I'll take care of Craig."

"How?"

Trent shook his head. "Don't worry about it, Mika. I'll handle it." He stood up and tugged me to my feet. "We should get back to the house. Grandpa seems taken with you. He won't be happy if he doesn't get to talk to you again."

I silently walked hand in hand with Trent back to the house. Even though he said he could handle our little Craig problem on his own, I had to wonder what exactly he planned to do about it. I couldn't shake the feeling it could very well end up in a fight between the two of them. And a bloody one at that.

Chapter 20

I didn't see Trent on Sunday—he wanted to give me some alone time to make my decision. But we did talk on the phone for over an hour.

Even though Trent felt I needed more time to make up my mind, by Sunday evening I'd pretty well decided what I wanted. I wanted Trent as mine. Except for the stunt he pulled with Silvia, I felt he'd always be there for me. Given how once I accepted him as my mate he wouldn't be able to break up with me, or look for another to take my place, it pretty much helped to make me trust him again. What girl would turn down that type of commitment from her guy? Some were lucky to get *any* kind of commitment out of them.

No, I wouldn't be telling Trent I wasn't going to take him as my mate when he finally let me tell him my decision. He'd gotten more than under my skin. He already had a place in my heart. I realized now that I hadn't so much been obsessing about him but rather falling head over heels for him, hard. I believed in love at first sight. If I didn't believe, I sure as

heck wouldn't be as addicted to romance novels as I was. In some ways, Trent was my hero who'd walked off one of the pages in my books. Not that Trent would want to hear that, considering he wasn't a fan of romance novels.

I also came to the decision that I wouldn't be telling anything about this mate business to either Mom or Dad. I knew they wouldn't understand, and it wasn't as if I planned on telling them about Trent being a shape-shifter. They would more than likely have me carted off to a loony bin if I did that. I had it all worked out though. I'd let them believe Trent and I were only dating and take it from there. Mom and Dad being high school sweethearts themselves, I hoped they'd understand when Trent and I decided to get married after we graduated from university.

At school on Monday morning, I found Trent waiting for me near the parking lot. He met me at my car. He pulled me into his arms and gave me a hug. "I missed you."

"I missed you too," I said as I hugged him back.

Trent laced his fingers through mine as we headed to the school's front doors. "I've already been to my locker, so we'll go to yours and then right to homeroom. You should have enough time to talk to Jeff before class starts."

I gave him a sideways look. "You really want to stake your claim over me, don't you?"

"Of course. With you as my potential mate, I won't tolerate other guys who are interested in you anywhere near you. At least not until you've told me your decision."

I pulled Trent to a stop just outside the school's doors.

“Now I hope that doesn’t mean you’re going to take a hissy fit if I just talk to Jeff, or any other guy for that matter. I still consider Jeff to be a friend.”

“I know. It’ll be hard. If the cat had his way he’d keep you away from him, but I understand. I’m not that much of a tyrant.”

“Good. Just remember that.”

We walked inside the school and went to my locker. After I got what books I needed, we headed for our homeroom class. As we passed Silvia and her crew in the hallway, Silvia’s face turned red with fury when she saw Trent and me walking hand in hand. Trent didn’t so much as glance her way, which seemed to infuriate her even more.

Jeff happened to be standing outside the classroom talking to a couple of his friends. He smiled when he spotted me, but it slipped slightly when he saw who I walked with. I motioned Jeff over after Trent left me, to stand a short distance away.

Jeff looked over at Trent who stood watching, then back at me. “You’re going to tell me things are back on with Trent. Right?”

“It doesn’t mean we still can’t be friends.”

He gave me a half smile. “I guess not. I had a feeling things hadn’t completely cooled off between you and Trent. It would have been nice, but I understand. I hope you made him pay just a little bit for dumping you for Silvia. It’s the least he deserved.”

I chuckled. “We worked things out.”

“Well, I guess that’s that then. Just know if things don’t work out with Trent, I’ll be here.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good. I guess I’ll see you around.”

After Jeff went into the classroom, Trent moved back to my side. He had a strained look on his face. It eased somewhat after I put my hand in his and smiled up at him. Obviously my talk with Jeff had been hard on us both.

Trent sat next to me in Math, and when the bell rang for the second period, he gave me a quick kiss on the forehead before he left to go to his next class.

I now had to face the only part of the day I didn’t look forward to—going to English. Rachel would be there. She was sure to make some snarky remark about me having taken Trent from Silvia. Not that Silvia had really had him in the first place.

On the way to English, I promised myself I wouldn’t let Rachel get to me. I knew if I showed any kind of reaction to what she said she’d try and hurt me even more. Just like with wild animals, you never show your fear to a bully.

Inside the classroom, I took my seat and waited for the teacher to arrive. Rachel sat behind me with her eyes boring into my back—I knew she was glaring because my back itched. I in no way acknowledged her presence.

“You may have taken Trent from Silvia, but that doesn’t make you any less of a freak,” Rachel finally said.

I clenched my hands on top my desk and counted to ten. She could say whatever she wanted, but I wasn’t going to turn

around to listen to more of her taunts. If she intended to get a rise out of me, she would be in for some disappointment. I wouldn't lower myself to her standards.

She poked me in the back with what felt like her pen. "You really are a retard like Silvia says. You only have to look at you to know that. And you can tell your 'boyfriend' that as long as he stays with you he'll be classed the same as you. You'll both be seen as a couple of freaks."

Biting the inside of my cheek, I just barely stopped myself from turning around to say, *As if Trent gives a damn what anyone thinks of him?* He'd never cared in the past. Why would he start now?

The teacher finally arrived and he brought the class to order. I was grateful he decided to spend most of the period reading passages from the book we had to read, and then taking up the questions he had assigned. Rachel didn't get a chance to bother me for the rest of the period. Needless to say, I didn't stick around once the bell rang for lunch.

I stepped into the cafeteria and looked for Trent. He sat at our table facing the doors. When our gazes met, he smiled and waved me over. Knowing his smile had been just for me, I felt good inside. I forgot all about the crappy things Rachel had said in English.

Trent pulled out the chair next to his. As I sat down, he asked, "So how did your other classes go?"

I shrugged. "Fine. Nothing out of the ordinary."

Trent searched my face. "Why do I have the feeling you aren't telling me everything?"

I waved his question away with a flick of my hand. "It's nothing. Really. Just Rachel and her usual snarky remarks. I didn't expect anything less from her."

"I made things worse for you, didn't I? I should have thought of something else—"

I cut Trent off. "Stop. What's done is done. There's no use beating yourself up about it. But I do have to say, what did you expect? Silvia has always had it in for me. Silvia and her crew will just use you as an excuse to be even nastier."

Trent's eyes flashed gold when something snagged his attention. I quickly looked around. Luckily, it seemed as if no one else had noticed the change in his eyes. I then followed his line of sight. Silvia was headed right for our table.

I placed my hand on Trent's arm and said quietly, "You'd better get yourself under control or she'll notice the change in eye color."

He took a deep breath and placed his hand on top of mine. As if my touch had been enough to calm him, Trent's eyes returned to normal.

Just before Silvia reached us, he said, "You don't have to say anything. I'll handle her."

Silvia stopped at the end of the table, right next to where Trent sat. She sneered down at him. "You just couldn't keep away from the trash, could you?"

By this time almost everyone in the cafeteria had turned to watch the exchange between Trent and Silvia. What had happened here last Friday had to be still fresh in everyone's minds.

Trent shot to his feet to stare down at Silvia. “The only piece of trash I can see is the one standing in front of me.”

Silvia’s mouth opened and closed like a gasping fish on land. “How dare you?” she shrieked. “I’m not the one who’s trash. It’s the freak sitting next to you who’s the trash.”

Trent shook his head. “Poor, delusional, Silvia. You think you’re so great. You really must be blind if you actually think anyone besides the empty-headed idiots you call friends like you.”

Silvia’s face twisted into a mask of anger. “I don’t need you. I can have any boy I want in this school. I just have to crook a finger in his direction and he’ll come running.”

“Prove it then,” Trent shot back. “I bet you it doesn’t work. No guy would be crazy enough to take up with you, let alone want to kiss you.”

Silvia looked around as more than one person around us started to laugh. “You kissed me.”

“No. I let *you* kiss *me*. And I didn’t enjoy it.”

“As if you enjoy kissing the freak,” Silvia snapped.

“More than you’ll ever know.”

Trent turned, pulled me to my feet and took me into his arms. Amid cat calls and whistles, Trent took my mouth in a kiss that made my toes curl inside my running shoes. He kissed me until I barely even knew my own name. When he ended the kiss, I had to lean against him or I would have fallen on my butt. In a daze, I watched a red-faced Silvia stomp away.

Trent looked down at me. I felt his heart racing under

my hand where I had it held against his chest. I looked up at him. His eyes were a lighter brown, but he seemed to have himself under control. The same couldn't be said about me. I knew if we hadn't been in the middle of the school cafeteria I would have liked that kiss to last much longer than it had.

With Trent's help, I sat back down in my chair while he sat in his. "Well, that worked better than I thought."

I blinked. "What...worked?"

Trent smiled crookedly in my direction. "The kiss. It worked better than I thought it would. Silvia shouldn't be bothering either one of us again."

Finally coming out of my daze, I snorted. "You hope. Honestly, I can't see her giving up that easily."

"Then I'll just have to come up with another way to publicly humiliate her. A few more of those and she'll be lucky if she'll be able to show her face in school."

"If they involve me at least give me some warning, huh."

He inched his chair closer to mine. "Why? I liked the glazed look that came over your eyes after I kissed you."

I punched Trent in the arm. "Thanks. Maybe I'll have to return the favor some day. I'll just grab you, throw you down on one of the tables here and kiss you until you forget your own name as well."

His eyes turned gold in a matter of seconds. With a groan, Trent leaned forward until our foreheads touched. "You're killing me here, Mika." After a couple deep breaths he pulled away, once more in control of himself.

Knowing the effect I had over Trent left me slightly

breathless. “Wednesday,” I said softly. At the questioning look he gave me, I added. “I’ll give you my decision on Wednesday. It’s not fair to keep you waiting. You’re the one that has to fight against...” I didn’t finish the end of the sentence, knowing he’d understand what I meant. “I’ll ask if you can come over to my place for dinner on Wednesday—then I’ll tell you.”

“Are you sure you don’t need more time?”

“No. I pretty much have already made up my mind, but I’ll give it another couple days to think about it to be sure.”

Trent nodded. “Then I’ll come over on Wednesday.”

Chapter 21

When I asked if Trent could come over for dinner on Wednesday, Mom said it wouldn't be a problem. She thought it would be a great idea for her and Dad to get to know Trent better. After Saturday, both Mom and Dad assumed Trent and I had gotten back together, which we had. The only one out of my family I had to worry about ruining Trent's visit was Jared. For some reason my little brother had become fascinated with Trent after his first visit. I know I didn't want Jared following us around like a puppy dog.

At the end of school on Wednesday Trent came home with me. We met up together at my locker after the last period. As we walked out of school, we ended up passing Silvia in the hallway. She didn't even look at us on her way by. The kiss Trent had laid on me in the cafeteria had seemingly done the trick. Silvia now acted as if Trent and I didn't exist, which suited us just fine. Even Rachel had been blessedly silent in English.

On the drive to my house, Trent and I talked about the

upcoming Math quiz we were to have next week. I, of course, asked if he could help me study for it. I still thought Trent made a better Math teacher than Mr. Morrison.

I groaned when I pulled into the driveway and saw Jared hanging around out in the front yard. Before we got out of the car I figured I'd better warn Trent about Jared. "Ah, before we get out, I should give you the heads up. Jared is probably going to be a major pain in the butt. He likes you. If he was my sister instead of my brother, I think I'd have to worry about him trying to steal you from me."

Trent laughed. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure Jared won't be that bad."

"Oh, I beg to differ. He can be a huge nuisance when he wants to be."

"I think I can handle it."

After we got out of the car, Jared met us before we made it to the front door. "Hey, Trent. How's it going?"

"Not bad."

"So what are you guys going to do before dinner?"

I quickly stepped in then. "We're going to watch TV or something."

"Cool. How about I bring my system down and we can play my new game. It's a four-player one."

I opened my mouth to tell Jared to forget it, but Trent spoke up before I could. "Why not? I have a system of my own and play when I can." Trent winked at Jared. "We can gang up on Mika."

"Hey!" I said. "That is *so* not fair. I'm crappy at video

games in the first place.”

Jared rubbed his hands together. “Oh, this is going to be fun. I’ll go get my system and meet you guys in the living room.”

Once Jared had gone inside I turned to Trent. “I thought we could spend some time together without my pesky brother hanging around.”

Trent put his arm around my shoulders as we walked toward the front porch. “I’m using Jared as a distraction.”

“Why do you need a distraction?”

“It’s more a distraction for the cat. Let’s just say both of us are getting a little worked up right now, and we’ll stay that way until you tell me what you’ve decided.”

“Ah. I get it.”

Trent pulled me to a stop. “And one other thing before we go inside. I suggest that when you do plan to tell me, make sure we aren’t anywhere near your parents or your brother.”

“Why? Are you expecting to go cat and kill them if I tell you to get lost?”

Trent chuckled. “No. Even if you did turn me down I wouldn’t go on a killing spree. It’s just if you do say ‘yes’ my emotions may run a little high. I don’t want to have to explain anything to your parents that I don’t want them to know.”

“No problem. After dinner we can go out back to the tree fort. And I’ll make sure Jared stays in the house. I can only imagine what he would do if he ever saw you shift into the black cougar. We’d probably never be able to get rid of him.”

Both Jared and Trent ended up kicking my butt on Jared's video game. I never stood a chance with the two of them hunting my character down at every opportunity. Eventually I gave up playing entirely. I was just as happy to sit on the couch next to Trent and watch them play.

Dinner went over well. Mom and Dad seemed to genuinely like Trent, which pleased me, considering I was about to seriously commit myself to him. I don't know what I would have done if Mom and Dad had hated Trent. It would have made my life a living hell.

Once I'd helped to clear the table with Mom, I said, "Trent and I are going to go out back to the tree fort."

Dad, who still sat at the table with Trent, looked over at Mom. "Ah, it's kind of dark out there, Mika. And it's definitely getting cooler at night. Isn't it, dear?"

Mom rolled her eyes at Dad. "Real subtle." She then looked over at Trent and me. "Go on. I'll turn the lights on out back so your father doesn't worry. And be careful of the tree fort. It's getting kind of weather-beaten."

"We'll be careful, Mom."

I ushered Trent to the front door and we put on our running shoes and jackets. We made our way around to the side of the house and then into the backyard. The outside lights came on as we walked to the tree fort.

Careful to make sure there were no more loose pieces of wood, I slowly climbed up to the fort while Trent came up behind me. I didn't want to fall like the last time. Trent ma-

naged to maneuver himself into the tight space, not that I would have complained if I had to sit in his lap to make more room.

I took a quick peek at the house. I didn't see anyone standing in one of the windows watching us—namely I didn't see Jared. Mom must have told him to give us some privacy.

"So," I said as I zipped my jacket up higher.

"So," Trent said back as he wrapped one of his arms around my shoulders and pulled me close to his side.

"Okay, no more stalling. I've reached my decision." I turned my head so I could look Trent in the eyes. "I've decided I want to be your mate. I don't want to be with anyone else. You don't care that I'm a bit of a loner, and that I spend too much time with my nose jammed in a book. I don't feel like the school freak around you." I took a deep breath. "It all seems a little rushed, but I think I'm falling in love with you. I think I started to fall for you a couple years ago when I first started to watch you from across the cafeteria."

Trent picked me up and sat me across his lap. He cupped my face in his hands. "I love you as well, Mika. I have since I first saw you in grade eight. Even then I knew you were the one for me." His eyes lightened to gold and they developed a muted glow. "I don't want to ever lose you."

With my arms wrapped around his neck, I leaned in and brushed a kiss across Trent's lips. "I'm not going anywhere."

The sound of purring filled the fort as Trent took my lips in a deeper kiss. If I could have purred, I would have been purring as well. As Trent kissed me, I pulled the pony tailer

out of his hair and threaded my fingers through his glossy mane. Trent wrapped his arms around my waist and held me closer. I felt his heart racing against my chest.

All too soon he pulled away. The only sound inside the fort was our heavy breathing. He gathered me close and tucked my head under his chin.

He suddenly stiffened. His chest expanded as he took in great gulps of air through his nose. I pulled away and looked him in the face. "What is it?" His eyes seemed to glow a little brighter. The pupils had become mere slits.

Trent lifted me off his lap and sat me down on the floor. His nostrils flared as he took another deep breath. "Stay here."

I couldn't quite stifle a gasp as Trent launched himself out the fort's entrance. I stuck my head out in time to see him land on his feet at the bottom of the tree. I heard the quiet growl of a large cat, which I knew wasn't Trent. His head swung over to the very back corner of the backyard as he stepped into the shadows. I had just enough time to see him shift to his cat form before he disappeared into the darkness.

Like hell was I going to stay up here in the fort while Trent went to confront Craig. I knew it had to be Craig. Who else could it be?

Determined not to let my boyfriend have to face the other cougar alone, I cautiously made my way down the tree. I'd no idea what I'd be able to do once I got to the cougars. Trent had stood up to Silvia who'd bullied me. Now it was my turn to stand by his side when he confronted Craig, who'd bullied him.

Unable to see too well in the dark, I slowly followed the sounds of hissing and spitting, which was interspersed with growls. Thankfully, they kept those to a minimal noise level. Anything louder would have drawn unwanted attention. I know I didn't want either Mom or Dad to come outside to investigate.

When I finally found them, Trent stood almost nose to nose to Craig. Both were still in cougar form. Craig lifted his head as I approached. Trent used the opportunity to smack Craig in the face with his paw. Craig growled and backed a little away before he shifted to his human form. Trent followed suit.

"Get out of here, Craig," Trent said with a growl lacing his words.

"It's a free country. I can go wherever I want."

"I don't want you here. Mika's my mate, so back off. I won't tolerate you anywhere near her."

Craig snorted. "She may have accepted to be your mate, but I bet you haven't finished it. Have you? Knowing you, Trent, you'll probably wait until your mate tells you she's ready to have you claim her completely."

"Frick off, Craig."

He shook his head. "I'll take that as a 'No.' Then you know until you *have*...claimed...her she's still fair game. Maybe I want her as *my* mate. I'm the leader, I can take whatever I want and there really isn't anything you can do about it unless you want to challenge me for the leadership."

Trent roared with rage. "Mika is mine," he bit out. "Ei-

ther you stay away from her or I'll take you down."

All three of us froze in place when Mom stepped out onto the back deck and called my name. "Mika? Is everything okay out there?"

"Everything's fine, Mom," I called back.

"Are you sure? I thought I heard something coming from out here."

"It's nothing, Mom. It's just a couple neighborhood cats having a fight. Trent and I scared them off."

"Oh. It's getting late. Why don't you and Trent come back inside?"

"We'll come inside in a minute."

I turned back to Craig and Trent after Mom went back into the house. Craig slowly moved away and said to Trent, "I'll be seeing you soon."

Trent took me by the elbow and started to walk me toward the house. "I thought I told you to stay in the fort."

"I wasn't going to sit up there while you and Craig go at each other in my backyard."

Trent shook his head. "You're either really brave, or too foolish for your own good. If you got in between the two of us while we fought in cougar form, we could have ripped you to shreds."

I dug in my heels and forced Trent to stop walking. "So you want me to just stand by and let Craig rip you to shreds instead?"

"If it comes to that. I don't want anything to happen to you."

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“And I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

Trent chuckled. “I never realized you were such a fighter until now.”

“I’m not normally. I guess just with you I am.”

“Thanks.” Trent gave me a slow, languid kiss. After he pulled away he said, “Come on, let’s go back inside before your dad comes out next.”

I wrapped my arm around Trent’s waist as he put his around my shoulder. A chill ran down my spine as I thought of the last thing Craig had said to Trent. I couldn’t shake the feeling that the next time he saw Trent things would get ugly.

Chapter 22

Later that night I checked my emails. There was one from Cathy sitting in my inbox. I hadn't told her yet that Trent and I had gotten back together. To be honest, I'd been holding off on it. Even though I'd told Cathy that I thought Trent could be the black cougar, now that I knew for sure, I didn't think I would tell her the whole truth. Not that she'd ever brought the subject up after I told her about Trent dumping me for Silvia.

Deciding I couldn't hold Cathy off indefinitely, I wrote her an email explaining how Trent and I had gotten back together. That it had all been a misunderstanding and that Trent knew he'd screwed up. I also told her what Trent had said to Silvia in the cafeteria, and that he had kissed me practically in front of the whole school.

That taken care of, I shut down my laptop. I thought of calling Trent, but decided maybe that would be a little too much. He'd only been gone for an hour. I'd driven him home shortly after we had gone back inside. I didn't want to be one

of those clingy girlfriends.

We hadn't made any definite plans to see each other the next day. I had English and Math homework I had to finish before I could go anywhere. In the end, we'd decided I'd call Trent once I had my homework finished.

I went to my dresser and looked at the few bottles of perfume I had. I didn't wear it that often, but I thought maybe Trent would like it if I wore some tomorrow when I saw him. I picked up a bottle and tried to take the top off the sprayer. The lid fit on it so snugly I had to really give it a yank to get it off. The bottle slipped out of my hand and landed on the hardwood floor with a crack. I swore under my breath when I bent down and saw the top had broken right off.

I used one of the dirty towels from my laundry hamper to mop up the mess. The strong smell of perfume filled my bedroom. Thinking to clear some of it out, I pushed open my curtains and slid my bedroom window open all the way. Cold night air rushed inside.

The sound of a low growl drew my attention. I watched a grey-brown cougar step out of the shadows. Craig had returned. I slammed my window shut and yanked the curtains closed, then picked up my cordless phone and punched in Trent's number.

Trent picked it up after the third ring. "Hello?"

"Trent it's me. He's back."

"Mika? Who's back?"

"Craig's back. I just spotted him in cougar form in the backyard."

A couple of seconds went by before Trent spoke again. "Whatever you do, don't go outside to confront him. Promise me, Mika, you'll stay inside the house."

"I've no intentions of going outside alone while he's out there."

"As long as you stay inside you'll be fine. I'm glad you called to tell me."

"The guy's a pain in the ass. Doesn't he know when he isn't welcome?"

"Don't let him get to you. I'm sorry to cut this short, but I have to go talk to my dad about something. You're still going to call me tomorrow?"

"Right after I have my homework finished."

"Then I'll talk to you tomorrow. And don't worry about Craig. He soon won't be a problem."

After Trent hung up, I had to wonder what exactly he'd meant about Craig soon not being a problem.

* * * *

It took a couple of hours to finish my homework. The whole time I worked, I couldn't shake the feeling Trent had gone to confront Craig. It was just the way he'd said Craig would no longer be a problem that had me worried. I knew Trent was as big as Craig, if not slightly bigger, both in cat and human form. If it came down to an actual fight, I'd no idea who'd end up the victor. I just didn't trust Craig to play fair. He reminded me of a male version of Silvia—both were bullies. *Now wouldn't they be a match made in heaven?* Actually they probably would kill each other if they ever met.

With my homework done, I called Trent. This time his dad answered the phone. “Hi, Mr. Hunter, is Trent there?”

“Hi, Mika. And none of that Mr. Hunter business. Call me Travis.”

I chuckled. “Okay, Travis. Can I talk to Trent?”

Travis seemed to hesitate. “Um, he just stepped out for a little while.”

“Where did he go?” A shiver of dread ran down my spine. When he didn’t say anything, I said, “Please.”

Travis sighed. “Trent didn’t want me to tell you.”

I closed my eyes for a few seconds and took a deep breath. “He went after Craig, didn’t he?”

“Yes. He did it for you, Mika. To keep you safe from Craig.”

“What did he do?”

“He’s going to challenge Craig for the leadership and take his rightful place.”

“Where?”

“At the clearing. Near the lake at the reservation.”

Without bothering to say goodbye, I hung up the phone. I knew exactly what clearing Trent and Craig would be in—the same clearing Silvia had sent me to. Craig had said it was part of his territory. It couldn’t be anywhere else.

I found Mom in the kitchen and told her I’d be over at Trent’s, then grabbed my jacket out of the closet and rushed out the door.

I sped all the way to the lake. Right now I could have cared less if a cop pulled me over and gave me a ticket for

speeding. I just had to get to the reservation. That was all that mattered.

I'd thrown out the map Silvia had forged Trent's name to. Having been soaked in the rain, the ink had run all together making it unreadable. But I remembered where I had to go to find the clearing. Walking as fast as I could, I soon reached the wooded area beyond which sat the clearing. More concerned with getting there rather than where I stepped, I tripped a couple times on fallen branches.

I'd almost reached the other side when I heard the sounds of two large cats snarling in rage. I started to run. When I emerged in the clearing, I had to cover my mouth to stop myself from screaming Trent's name. Trent and Craig, in cat form, were in the middle of a fight. And from the look of Craig's bloodied fur, it looked as if they'd already been at it for some time.

With my gaze locked on the pair, I inched closer. A slight breeze blew against my back. Trent managed to get a particularly vicious swipe in before his head turned in my direction. Too late, I screamed for him to watch out. Craig went on the attack. He dug his claws into Trent's sides and dragged him beneath him. Trent roared as he struck at Craig's head with his claws before the other cougar could take him by the throat.

I knew I had to do something. Anything. I quickly scanned the ground around me to find anything that could be used as a weapon. A couple of large rocks sat not too far from where I stood. I scooped them up and moved in closer to the

battling cougars. I hauled back and threw one at Craig. It hit him in the ribs. I quickly followed the first with the second, which glanced off his shoulder.

Obviously not liking it that I'd hit him, Craig threw himself off Trent, and with a roar, ran right for me. I turned around and took off at a run. "Oh crap, oh crap!"

A heavy weight hit me, and I fell face first onto the ground. Frozen in place, I bit back a whimper of fear as I felt hot breath and my jacket was pulled away from the back of my neck. *Oh no! Here come the sharp teeth!* And then there was a heavy thump and Craig was gone. Trent must have launched himself at him.

Getting up on my hands and knees, I moved out of the way of the cougars as they started to fight once again. When I figured I'd reached a safe enough distance, I stopped and turned to watch.

This time it was Trent who brought Craig down. Trent took him by the back of the neck and bit down until he lay limp beneath him. Defeated, Craig shifted to his human form.

Trent released his neck and shifted as well. He stood panting as he looked down at Craig. "It's over. I won. I'm taking your place as leader." He then looked around the clearing. In a loud voice, he said, "You all can come out now. I can smell your scents, so I know you're there."

Six more cougars moved into the clearing. They stood in a ring around us. Two of them growled at Trent with their ears flat against their heads. Trent roared. "I defeated Craig in a fair fight. Do you two want to be next?"

The two went to stand next to Craig, who'd picked himself off the ground.

Craig spat on the ground at Trent's feet. "You may have won, but this isn't over." He then looked over at the remaining four cougars, who'd stood their ground. "Let's go."

They ignored Craig and moved to stand next to Trent.

Craig hissed at them. "Traitors." He then shifted back to cougar form and ran out of the clearing with the other two cougars at his heels.

Trent helped me up on my feet. "You shouldn't have come. I told you I would handle Craig."

I would have slapped Trent on the arm, but he had more than a few scratch marks on his arms and across his chest. "And I told you I didn't want to see you hurt." Unable to stay away from him any longer, I hugged him.

Trent kissed the top of my head. "I guess you're going to be the kind of mate who'll do what she thinks is best no matter what I say."

I pulled enough away so I could kiss his chin. "You got that right." I stiffened as the four cougars standing behind him shifted to their human forms.

With me held to his side, Trent turned to face them. In human form, they were close in build and height to him. They wore their straight black hair in varying lengths from past their shoulders to the ends just touching the tops of their shoulders. They were all around Trent's age.

One of them stepped forward and grabbed Trent by the forearm. Trent held onto his. "We won't fight you, Trent. If

we'd been strong enough to challenge Craig, we'd have done it long before now. We'll gladly accept you as our leader." The shape-shifter then smiled at me before he turned back to Trent. "We'll leave you alone with your mate. And we'll tell our families you've taken your rightful place as leader."

Trent nodded then let go of his arm. "Nice to see you again, Stephen. And you, Kris, Neil, Luke. Tell the elders I'll be around to talk to them soon."

"Will do," Stephen said. "Catch you later."

The four shifted to cougars and left the clearing. Now alone, I pulled Trent's head down and kissed him until we were both breathing hard. "No more sneaking off. You got that?"

His familiar crooked smile formed on his lips. "I promise I won't. It looks as if I can't keep anything from you anyway. Let's go back to my place and give my parents the good news. I know my grandfather'll be happy. He's only been pushing me for at least the last couple of years to take my rightful place."

"Why didn't you?" I asked as we started walking.

"Because I didn't have you to think about. I did it for you, Mika."

I put my arm around Trent's waist and hugged him. Now, with the Craig problem solved—I hoped—I smiled. A lot had happened since the start of a school year I'd been dreading. So far it was one of the best. With a boyfriend who could shape-shift into a black cougar, I had a feeling the rest of the school year would be far from boring.

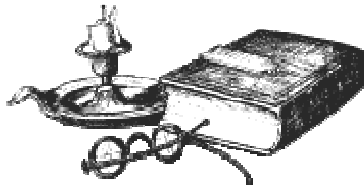
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marisa Chenery was always a lover of books, but after reading her first historical romance novel she found herself hooked. Having inherited a love for the written word, she soon started writing her own novels.

After trying her hand at writing historicals, she now writes paranormals.

Marisa lives in Ontario, Canada with her husband and four children. Check out Marisa's website at www.marisachenery.com. She would love to hear from you, so drop her an email while you're there.

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