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FOXY LADY

MARIE HARTE

There's more than one way to outsmart a fox...

A Cougar Falls Story

Trust Julia Easton to screw up Sheriff Ty Roderick's March Madness plans. The pixie-faced vixen might be the picture of feminine perfection, but she tests his innate sense of order to its limits. Weeks ago, he let his conscience turn down a proposition his body still burns to accept—then she vanished. Now he's in the middle of Nowhere, Washington, racing to rescue her from danger.

There's risk in leaving Cougar Falls, but it's the only way Julia can hope to save her sister from making the same mistake she almost made with Ty. Settling down and having kits is one thing, but it can't be done with a human, especially one from a hunting family. Unfortunately, her sister isn't budging, and the fiancé's brother won't take Julia's no for an answer, either.

When Ty comes riding to their rescue, Julia plans to use him and lose him. No way is she throwing herself at that alpha jerk's feet in gratitude. Then Ty gives her the answer her heart still longs for: he wants to spend the rest of his life making things right. Now if only she can find the courage to say yes.

Warning: Beware a foxy sheriff, a backwoods bad guy, a cunning vixen, sexy escapades in and out of the bedroom, and the return of stubborn male shifters who think they know everything.

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Foxy Lady

Marie Harte

Dedication

To Sasha, thanks for taking me on.

Chapter One

The middle of Nowhere, Washington

Ty swore under his breath as he dodged yet another pothole in what passed for a paved road in this crappy little town. For all that folks complained about Cougar Falls, the town council would have been caught dead before letting their streets look like this.

On either side of Main Street people parked pickup trucks and four-wheel drives next to the occasional sedan—all American-made. A diner, grocery store and pharmacy sat on the east side of Main, while the local hardware, sheriff's office, hunting lodge and bar took up the west. On the few side streets in this less-than-picturesque small town, eclectic shops attempted to capitalize on the area. But from what Ty had seen, the surrounding lake, forest and mountains gave Nowhere, Washington its real grandeur.

His stomach grumbled again, his high metabolism making it nearly impossible to go too long without food. Unfortunately, instinct told him if he didn't find Julia soon, the damned woman would find herself in more trouble than she could handle. Hunters. God almighty. Thoughts of the stubborn redhead awakened his libido from the hibernation he'd endured in her absence. *So* not what he wanted right now, not with his family's constant pressure to procreate. As if that wasn't bad enough, he was missing the game tonight at Burke's place.

"Trust Julia to screw up March Madness for me," he muttered as he left the main town behind and turned into a neat little convenience store. Thank God this place had a paved lot. After filling up the fuel tank on his truck, he hurried through the bitter wind.

Inside the store, Ty grabbed packets of jerky, some trail mix and a water.

"That it for ya?" an older man asked and rubbed his grizzled cheeks. He wore a plaid flannel shirt with a nametag pinned to the pocket—*Bart, owner and operator*.

"And the gas." After Ty paid, he took out a picture of Julia and shoved it across the counter. "You seen this woman?"

He stared down at the same feminine perfection the old man studied. Thick, auburn hair covered her shoulders and framed a pixie-like face. Her light brown eyes flashed with humor in the picture, and he remembered her laughing at something Gerald had said. Of course, that was several months ago, back when the blasted woman had a sense of humor. Now he was lucky to get even a glare, and all because he'd done the right thing.

Fuming about a night he wished he could redo, he asked again, "You seen her or not?"

The old man smiled. “Yeah.” He said nothing more.

“Where is she?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“She’s a friend of mine.”

“Then shouldn’t you know where she is?”

Ty gritted his teeth. The wily old coot might as well have been Ac-taw. He danced around words as fine as any shapeshifting silver fox Ty had encountered.

Ty wanted to flash his badge and demand answers, but he had no jurisdiction here. And explaining Cougar Falls and its citizens to any outsider without council permission would not only bring danger to the people Ty had sworn to protect, but it would get him kicked out of his clan in a heartbeat. A Shifter without a clan had no place in Cougar Falls. Ty couldn’t imagine living anywhere else. Ever.

He could force the old man to answer, but Ty didn’t believe in bullying when a cagey fox could handle a challenge in a far better way. Nothing satisfied him so much as matching wits and coming out the winner. Especially since he couldn’t afford to lose.

Ty rubbed his throat, feeling the press of responsibility tightening around his neck. He glanced at Julia’s picture again, worry for the slight woman increasing his urgency to find her and make sure of her safety.

Pretending to play the old man’s game, he sighed and settled on as much truth as he could. “Her name’s Julia Easton. She has two sisters, and they both look like her.”

“Pretty,” Bart murmured, a twinkle in his eyes.

“Very. Truth of the matter is that if I don’t play things right, I’m screwed. Woman just doesn’t understand I was doing it for her own good.” She treated him like he had the plague.

“Woman problems. I knew it.”

Woman problems. Ha. Try shapeshifting-vixen problems. Ty wished he had Julia here to shake some sense into her, but that would mean putting his hands on her pretty, pale, soft skin. Arousal centered in his groin.

He vented his frustration to the old man. “I’ve been wanting to get my hands on this particular woman for years. She’s cool, calm and unattainable. Never even looked at me twice while half the assholes in town are drooling all over her. Frankly, I just don’t have the time or energy to fawn over the woman.” Not that a Roderick should have to fawn. Dammit.

“Like that, is it?”

“Unfortunately, yeah. Then out of the blue, she gets drunk and propositions *me*. What was I supposed to do? Take advantage of her?”

“Hell, no.”

“Right. So I gently turned her down. That was four weeks ago. Stubborn woman won’t give me the time of day anymore.”

“That’s too bad.”

Ty appreciated Bart’s sympathy. God knew his friends and family weren’t giving him any. “My father thinks it’s funny. My mother’s on my case to settle down and have kits—kids. How can I if Julia won’t even speak to me?”

“Now that’s a problem.” Bart tapped the picture, his shrewd gaze on Ty’s face. “You planning on taking her back with you when you go?”

“Yes, I am.”

Bart shook his head. “Then things are going to go to hell in a handbasket sooner than I’d thought. Your pretty gal is with her sisters in Maude’s cabin on the hilltop. Another mile and a half down, make a right. Take the dirt road to the end and you’ll see a blue cabin.”

“Okay, thanks,” Ty said slowly.

“No, thank *you*. I can’t wait to see Ned Williams’ face when you try runnin’ off with his fiancée.”

“His *what*?”

“Rumor has it the wedding’s set for next week. Good luck, fella. You’re going to need it.”

“It’s amazing to me we didn’t abandon you at birth.”

“Julia!” Gabby gasped in shocked laughter. “Really.”

“Really,” Julia grumbled, aiming her glare at her youngest and most troublesome sister, Meghan. “I’ve been out here a half dozen times in the last four months at least, thanks to your nifty little note to the family. And that’s not counting all the trips I took to visit you at college. What were you thinking, Meghan? Aunt Lynn is in fits, Uncle Harry won’t speak to me—thanks for that, at least—but keeping quiet about you in love with an outsider is giving me ulcers.”

“So who asked you to keep quiet?” Meghan retorted.

“You’d rather the clan cut you off and force you to leave town? Choosing to go is one thing, but not having a choice to return is another.”

“But she’s in love...” Gabby trailed off when she saw Julia’s real anger.

“*Love*? What does the brat know about love?”

“I’m not ‘the brat.’ I’m twenty-two years old! My name is *Meghan*,” Meghan shouted and threw a pillow at Julia. “Just because you’re a few years older does not make you my mother.”

Gabby groaned.

Julia dove in headfirst. “No, our mother is right now rolling over in her grave because you’re crushing on some kid fresh out of college. A miracle, really, since his backwoods family makes the possibility of a *Deliverance* sequel all too real.”

Gabby laughed.

Meghan fumed. “Shut up, Julia. You’re such a snob.”

Julia’s eyes widened. Meghan couldn’t be serious. “I’m a snob? Meghan, they have mounted animals on their walls! Bears, mountain lions...*foxes*.”

Meghan sniffed. “It’s not like that stuffed fox was Uncle Pete, for cripes’ sake. We’re predators too, Ms. High and Mighty.”

Gabby shifted, clearly uncomfortable with the all-too-common disagreement. “Actually, Meghan, that kind of freaks me out too. I like Jason, but I’m worried about you.”

Gabby liking Jason seemed to ease some of Meghan’s tension. Julia’s doubled. She’d thought Gabby was on her side.

“Don’t worry about me. I know what I’m doing.” Meghan tossed her hair and flounced out of the room.

Gabby rolled onto her back on the bed and stared at the cracked ceiling. “Oh yeah, that went well.”

“I like Jason?” What the hell, Gabby? I thought we were in agreement. Meghan *doesn’t* know what she’s doing. She’s twenty-two going on twelve. She’s in heat for some boy and she thinks it’s love. If he doesn’t screw her over for some bimbo in a few years, his family will hunt her down and mount her to their wall.” Outsiders were nothing but trouble.

“Come on, Julia. He’s not that bad. Jason’s kind of nice. He’s a year older than Meghan, but he acts a lot more mature. And he’s not the hunter his family is.”

“Thank God for small favors. Still doesn’t change the fact he’s close to them. How long do you think Meghan can hide herself from Jason? The minute she tells him she’s Ac-taw, he’ll tell his family. And you can’t tell me you like any of the Williams men.”

“Ah, no, I don’t. And speaking of which, that sounds like a truck. Ned’s truck, I bet. What did you do to the guy to make him so hot and bothered for you?”

Julia paused, cocked her head and heard Ned Williams speaking over the rumble of his muffler. Through the window of the bedroom she saw him park his truck and approach the house. *Oh, please, not now*. She’d been hoping to avoid him on this trip, since her last visit to Nowhere had ended in a near mauling when she’d refused his offer of a quickie behind the Gas An’ Go...*again*.

He strutted ahead of his two younger brothers, Itchy and Snitchy, as she’d nicknamed them. Bob Williams scratched his crotch whenever the need hit, and considering how often his hand strayed to his zipper, she wondered if he had a venereal disease. Dave Williams couldn’t keep his mouth shut to save his life. She now knew more about Ned than she’d ever wanted, including how many times he jacked off when

he thought about her. That Ned found it natural to share such information gave her pause. Just how the hell close were these brothers?

She cringed. That thought she could have totally done without.

Half of the Williams family made a living at the local garage and hardware store, while the other half worked at the nearby lumbermill. Cutting down trees seemed right up their alley along with shooting wildlife, bullying the townsfolk and bothering strangers who wanted nothing to do with them. Well, except for Meghan. She apparently loved Jason Williams, the baby of his family, and a piece of the Williams puzzle that didn't seem to fit.

Unlike the burly, bulky Williams men, Jason was tall but slender. He trimmed his facial hair, looking less like a wild mountain man than a thoughtful, attractive college student. Like Meghan, he'd recently graduated from the University of Washington in Seattle. Little had Julia known that Meghan's foray away from Cougar Falls would turn into a permanent one.

Julia and Gabby had spent a year trying to convince their sister to leave Seattle behind and return home. Meghan talked about nothing but Jason. Jason this, Jason that, until the young fox had mentioned an engagement and a permanent move to the West Coast in the same breath.

But until Meghan received permission from the clan to marry Jason, she'd never be welcome in town again. Julia wasn't sure, but rumors about the magical totem that protected the town from outsiders led her to believe the Silver Fox Clan could actually make it impossible for Meghan to come home again.

To most Shifters, family and clan meant everything. For years, Julia had done her best to provide for her sisters, her only real family. Her uncle and aunt tolerated her because it was expected of them, and it made them look good in the eyes of others. Were it not for her desire to make her sisters' lives better, she would have left the Silver Foxes long ago.

Then again, Julia and her sisters needed the security belonging provided. No clan, no life in Cougar Falls. And if the rest of the foxes knew the truth about her mother and father, which her sisters, aunt and uncle dutifully protected, the Easton girls would be ass-out in no time. Just one more stressor she didn't need to dwell on, not with Ned knocking on the door.

"Yo, honey, open up."

Gabby snickered and rolled off the bed. She nudged Julia out the door into the living room. "Go on, *honey*. Tell your man to get lost."

"You know, you're becoming as big a pain as Meghan," Julia grumbled. Meghan, she noted, ignored her and talked to Jason on her cell phone—the same cell phone Julia paid for on a monthly basis. Perhaps the time had come to play hardball. Meghan wanted to act like an adult? Fine. She could start by paying her own bills.

Julia opened the door, needing the confrontation to get her mind off her baby sister wanting to marry. Damn Jason and his need to bond with family before making a permanent move to Seattle. He and Meghan had visited back and forth over the past six months. Her sister and an outsider. What was Meghan thinking?

And now another outsider thought he could charm *her*—a silver fox from Cougar Falls? Not just no, but *hell no*. Studying Ned from his shaggy brown hair to the tips of his steel-toed boots, she snarled. “Terrific, another headache. Just what I don’t need.”

He chuckled.

Subtlety had never worked on the man. Apparently obvious loathing didn’t either.

He grinned and leaned against the doorframe. “Come on, baby. Let’s hit the church and you can meet Pastor Reynolds.”

Julia frowned. “I’m sorry?”

Ned grabbed her in a bear hug before she could move. He outweighed her by a hundred pounds at least. When he squeezed, he choked the breath out of her. “I knew you didn’t mean all those things you said. Damn, you smell good.” He changed topics like the wind, unable to hold a thought in his stubborn head. Trying to convince him she couldn’t stand him had gone from difficult to downright impossible.

“I’m not sorry. I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. What pastor? What church?” Oh God, had Jason and Meghan already set a date? She could have sworn Meghan had mentioned a prolonged engagement.

“You and me, baby. I think I get it now. No sex without a ring. Heard that a time or two,” he said with a laugh. “And I’ve been thinking on it. You know, I think it’s time for me to get hitched.”

Meghan closed her cell phone and stared in shock. “Julia, I had no idea you and Ned were dating. And you have the nerve to talk about me and Jason.”

“I’m not dating Ned,” Julia snapped, and prayed for patience. She wiggled until Ned dropped her to her feet and put some distance between herself and the large man. “I’m here to drag you home where you belong. Ned, back off. I’m not marrying you today, tomorrow or any other day of the week.”

But Ned being Ned didn’t hear her. “The boys are here to help Meghan with whatever she needs. Geekboy is at the mill until five.”

For all Ned’s faults, he was loyal to his family. Though she sensed he didn’t understand his youngest brother’s need for a higher education, he didn’t degrade him in front of others. In front of family was another story. Jason had told Meghan horror stories about how nasty Ned could be when he didn’t get his way, and he hadn’t wanted Jason to go to school. He’d recently begun to support Jason’s decision to graduate college, but only because of the money Jason made running his own programming company, money Jason shared with his family.

“Come on. Let’s spend some time getting to know each other better.” Ned tried to drag her from the house.

Finally, even Meghan looked worried. Everyone knew Ned had a temper, but they'd yet to see it unleashed on them. Jason, however, had warned them to be wary of his oldest brother. As much as Jason loved his family, he was smart enough to understand and acknowledge their faults. Bullheaded tenacity was one of them. Their love affair with guns and hunting anything on four feet another.

Gabby reached for her arm. "Ah, Ned? We really need Julia's help with Meghan's wedding planning."

Meghan hurriedly added, "Maybe you could see her another time?"

In another lifetime, maybe. Ned and Gabby tugged on Julia's arms, making her feel like a piece of rope in a tug-of-war. She growled and yanked her arm back.

He dropped his hand and rubbed his chin, considering. At times, his gruff features bordered on attractive. Rough, thick, but pleasant. Until that obstinate glint lit his dark eyes. He reminded her of a bear, but without the true bulk and smarts of a grizzly to back him up.

Foxes, she reminded herself, made do with their smaller size by being smarter than the average predator. Hell, she couldn't beat him, but maybe...

The answer to her prayers arrived in a streak of speed. He shoved Itchy and Snitchy out of the way and slid past Ned with the ease of a skilled predator.

Gabby announced with breathless reverence, "Ty Roderick?"

Julia stared at her nemesis with equal amounts of desire, frustration and grudging relief. She threw herself into his arms and met his astonished gaze with a determined one of her own.

"Ty, sweetie. I didn't realize you were coming today. I'm so excited to see you." She kissed him quickly—ignoring the hum in her blood—and stepped back, pleased at this solution. Even Ned couldn't fail to realize she was taken now. Maybe that would make him leave her alone.

Except Ned didn't appear to care.

"*This* is your boyfriend?" He huffed and gave Ty a disapproving once-over. "Funny, you never mentioned him before."

Ty stood a few inches smaller than Ned but still topped Julia by a foot. Strength and vitality vibrated under the breadth of his chest and tightly muscled arms. He smelled like chocolate, and she chalked up her sudden need to sniff him again as hunger and not desire.

Ty narrowed his silver eyes, glaring at Ned with a meanness that didn't bode well. The sheriff was hard to rile, but when angry, Ty could tear a strip off a bear. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm her fiancé. Who the fuck are you?"

"*Fiancé?* No way in hell."

Meghan interrupted, "Actually, Ned is Jason's brother."

"Jason?"

Gabby gave a nervous laugh. “Meghan’s fiancé. His family’s from Nowhere. Long line of Williamses in this area. All of them hardworking men who practically own the town.” Her subtle warning did nothing to sway Ty’s anger.

“Hunters?” he asked straight out.

“Hell, yeah. I hit anything I’m aimin’ at,” Ned bragged. His brothers nodded behind him.

Ty’s eyes flashed with more than anger, but with a fury that really worried her.

It took Julia a moment to understand, and she quickly corrected Ty’s misapprehension. “His family hunts, with a lowercase h.”

Ty’s gaze swung to her. “You sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. Do you really think I’d be standing here so calmly if I wasn’t?” she asked, not happy he would question her common sense in front of her sisters.

Ty didn’t say anything, but his tension eased considerably. He turned his gaze back to Ned.

Julia had had enough. Meghan was damn well coming home with her, this instant. Ned could go to hell. Ty could lecture until he was blue in the face, but this wasn’t his problem, and—

He jerked Julia into his arms. “Well, well. Congrats, Meghan. I can’t *wait* to see what your aunt and uncle think of Jason.” He gave a tight laugh. “You know, Julia, it’s tough to keep up with all these hearts you keep breaking. Why, just a few weeks ago you wanted me. Now it’s Ned?”

If she’d had a gun, she might have shot him. “I don’t want—”

“To fight, I know,” he said smoothly and hugged her tighter. “I came to tell you I’m sorry. You want me? I’m yours. I think we should start with you moving in to my place, though. You know how much my folks want grandkids. Now how about we grab your sisters and head home in time for the spring festival?”

Gabby and Meghan watched the spectacle with their mouths open. Julia wasn’t sure what to do. Agree with Ty to leave? Or try to wrestle back control of the situation?

“What in the hell are you talking about?” Ned roared. “You ain’t leaving. The family reunion is next week, and Mama wants to see the gals at dinner tomorrow. Jason has to bring Meghan, and *I’m* bringing Julia.” He curled his meaty hands into fists, and that quickly Ty went from teasing to lethal.

He pushed Julia behind him. “You want her, you go through me.”

Ned took a step closer, apparently saw something he didn’t like on Ty’s face, and stopped. “Hell, I’m not going to fight you in front of the women. But none of you is leaving until after the reunion. You need anything, Meghan, call Jason. Julia, I’ll see *you* tomorrow.” He gave Ty one final glare and left, his brothers in tow.

Through the front window, Julia watched Itchy and Snitchy climb into the cab while Ned grabbed a rifle from his truck. Lightning fast, he shot out each of Ty’s tires, as well as the tires on Julia’s SUV, leaving them stranded. With a one-fingered salute to Ty, Ned jumped into his truck and spun his wheels as he left.

“Uh-oh,” Meghan murmured. “I don’t think we’re going anywhere anytime soon.”

As one, she and Gabby turned slowly to regard Ty, who gripped Julia’s shoulders hard enough to leave marks. As if sensing her pain, he let go, and she faced him.

“Well, well. My two-timing *girlfriend* and her troublesome sisters. Now how about one of you pretty ladies tell me what the hell is going on before I turn feral and bite you?” His eyes smoked as they settled on Julia. “And not in a good way.”

Chapter Two

Ty didn't know whether to spank Julia or kiss her senseless. Just seeing her again aroused him in a way he was hard-pressed to explain. Her scent, the feel of her smooth skin under his hands, her soft kiss, all of it made him want to throw her down on the nearest bed and fuck her until he couldn't move. He wanted to tie her to him and make her admit she couldn't stop thinking about him. Because he sure as hell couldn't stop thinking about her.

Hearing that Neanderthal claim Julia had nearly ended Ned's life. It had taken a lot of discipline to remain still. Ty didn't like that loss of control. As town sheriff, he came into contact with conflict on a daily basis. He had a reputation as calm and collected. So why did Julia Easton tie him in knots?

At least the woman looked nervous. As she should.

"Well? I'm waiting," he said in a quiet voice, pleased when Julia and Gabby jumped.

The three sisters were exceptionally popular in the clan. Meghan was the youngest, and at the age where she needed to explore. No one had balked when she'd left town for college on the outside. Still, this Jason business would need some explaining.

Everyone liked Gabby, the most outgoing and genial of the three. She had a tawny complexion that suited her dark red hair, and a curvy frame where Meghan and Julia were leaner.

Slender, sexy and beautiful, Julia made him ache. She made him want to beg. He huffed. A Roderick didn't beg. Hell, at home he rejected sexual offers from women left and right. But Julia had never asked a thing from him, not until the sly vixen had propositioned him, drunk as a skunk. Now how the hell could he say yes to that and not have her hate him in the morning?

Meghan was the first to answer him. "Ty, uh, I'm, well..."

"Get on with it, Meghan." She really was cute. A younger version of Julia.

"The brat thinks she's in love," Julia said, her words laced with disgust. Her gaze met his before it skittered back to her sister.

"I *am* in love," Meghan retorted. "Just because you're turning into the neighborhood cat lady is no reason to be jealous I've found someone special."

Ty coughed to smother a laugh. "Cat lady?"

"You know, the old lady with no life who lives with like thirty cats for company."

"We like cats," Gabby defended, shooting Meghan a look that surprised Ty. She seemed genuinely annoyed.

Meghan flushed. "I'm just saying Julia blames me for having a sex life."

"I so did not need to hear that," Ty muttered.

Julia's eyes sparkled and her scent grew richer. When angry, the little spitfire turned him hard in a heartbeat. He casually crossed the room to stand behind an oversized chair to hide his erection. Talk about embarrassing, not to mention irritating. The vixen made him crazy like no one could.

"Okay, you want to talk about your sex life? Fine," Julia sneered. "Are you using birth control? Does Jason know what can happen when you go into heat? Is he prepared to help rear your litter?"

Fascinated, Ty watched the family interplay. He'd never seen Julia so impassioned. Normally she did her job with calm precision and couldn't be described as anything other than cool. But with Meghan, she acted like a virtual firecracker. A sultry redhead with a temper to boot. God, he wanted her.

Meghan stared from Julia to Ty and back again, her cheeks scarlet. "I am not going to talk about this in front of Ty."

Thank God.

She continued. "I'm going to call Jason to come get me." Tears filled her eyes. "He's the only one who understands me. The only one who *cares*." She sobbed and fled the room.

Everyone stared at the slammed door in silence.

After a moment, he asked, "You sure she didn't major in drama?"

Julia's lips curved.

Gabby choked on a laugh. "I'll go talk to her. You deal with him," she said to Julia, a knowing look in her eyes that made Julia blush. Gabby joined Meghan in the bedroom, leaving Julia and Ty alone together.

"Now it's just you and me, honey. Where should we start?"

Julia gnawed on her lower lip, and he wanted to kiss the sting away. She turned her direct amber-eyed gaze on him. "Why are you here?"

"You're welcome for saving you, by the way. Or would you rather I stepped aside so you and Ned can head down the aisle?" he asked dryly.

"Please. I can handle Ned."

"Oh?"

"Granted, he's an ass. But I know how to handle the type." The look she gave him heated his blood to boiling.

"I raced nearly two hundred miles on no sleep and shitty gas station food. I left the raptors in a frenzy, ready to rip out Sarah Duncan's feathers one by one. The cats are at the throats of the gray wolves again, the bears are losing their minds, and half our clan is in favor of instituting a new mating policy, whereby the silver foxes will soon have arranged marriages. I left all that behind to save you from Hunters."

"Hunters?" Julia blinked in confusion. "Rip out Sarah's feathers? Is she okay?"

He spoke through gritted teeth. “The Whitefeathers and Gerald have it all under control. Sarah’s the one who told me you were having trouble with Hunters.”

“What do the Whitefeathers have to do with this?”

“Julia, focus, would you? Why would Sarah think you were dealing with Hunters?” The thought of Julia being hunted down and killed had nearly stopped his heart before he’d managed to bear down and concentrate on finding her.

“Hunters? Where would she get that idea?” Her expression cleared. “Oh. Right. The last time we spoke I mentioned Jason’s family’s disgusting hobby of mounting dead things in their homes. She might have gotten the wrong impression.”

“I’m not sure she did. Ned Williams seems pretty threatening.” *And he likes you way too much for my liking.*

“He is, but he’s nothing I can’t handle.” Now she sounded like the competent legal assistant he knew her to be. Sexy, unruffled, self-contained. “I’m sorry if you rushed out here on our behalf, but we’re fine.”

“Oh, right. I can see that. Some asshole just shot all of our tires. Your sister is involved with an outsider the clan knows nothing about, and you’re getting married to Ned No-Neck Williams.”

Julia pinched the bridge of her nose. “I didn’t say we weren’t having some problems, but it’s a family matter. Not your concern, Ty.”

He liked her saying his name. He’d like it a whole lot better if she’d cry it out as her body clenched around his in orgasm. “Oh, but it is my concern. Meghan’s in some serious trouble. And it doesn’t seem like she’s going to drop this Jason anytime soon.”

“I know.” Julia sighed. “But we’ll handle it.”

“Yes, *we* will.” Ty made a sudden decision. Maybe he could fix a few issues at once. He had no transportation at the moment. Considering the “long line of Williamses” in Nowhere, he’d venture a guess he’d have a hard time finding spare tires for his truck in town.

Time to match wits with a sexy, conniving adversary. Satisfaction flooded him at the thought of tangling with Julia again. He really had missed her.

“What does ‘we will’ mean?” Suspicion made her voice husky.

“It means I’m here to fix a few things. But first things first.” He took a step closer, pleased when she licked her lips, nervous.

“Ty—”

He answered how he should have the first time she’d asked, four weeks ago. “Yes, Julia. Yes, I’ll take you home and make love to you until neither of us can walk.”

He kissed her before she could close her pretty mouth.

Julia had to be dreaming. No way Ty Roderick would step in to save her from Ned *and* fulfill her deepest desires all in the same day. But she couldn't ignore the heat building inside her from the taste of him.

He tasted like chocolate. She couldn't explain how, but he did. And his scent. Like spiced male and sex, topped with sugared seduction. He groaned low and deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue between her lips to sweep her mouth.

She never could have guessed it would be this good. Oh, she'd fantasized. For years she'd had a thing for the town sheriff. The unflappable man every woman wanted and every man wanted to emulate. Ty was a man's man. He fished and hunted with deadly accuracy in shifted form. Quick and devious, he could also talk politics or sports with the best of them.

Possessing a body corded with strength and a face anyone would call attractive, he was the catch of the season, if you could grab a hold of him. As slippery as an eel, he'd cut a swath through the females in town without settling on anyone. Julia refused to be added to his notch of conquests, so she'd kept her distance. And watched. And waited. But Ty never approached her. The other dogs in town did, but not the one silver fox she wanted.

And now he was kissing her like he meant it, and her entire body gelled. He shifted, drawing her closer, and she couldn't help noticing his insistent erection. Good Lord, he felt huge. Her sex throbbed, growing wet and needy while he ground against her.

"You feel so damned good," he whispered and ran kisses down her neck.

So did he. Though she had to reach up to kiss him, she liked his size. Petite, Julia would look up to most men she dated. But Ty topped most silver foxes she knew.

She gripped his neck as they kissed again, and her nipples strained against her clothing, begging to touch his naked chest. All thoughts of trouble and family and danger faded next to the need to feel Ty inside her.

She'd dreamed about him for so long...

A knock at the door interrupted them, like a spray of very cold water.

Julia sprang back, doused in reason once more.

Ty took a step in her direction, his eyes cloudy with lust, his mouth parted and ready for another kiss.

Julia couldn't help looking him over, centering on his obvious arousal. Oh boy. He looked big. Really hard, and really big.

"Don't move," he warned and walked to the door. After cracking it long enough to take a sniff, he stepped back and pulled it open. "You must be Jason."

Jason blinked in surprise. "Ah, well, yes." He cleared his throat, sensing the buried frustration in Ty as easily as Julia felt it. "I'm here for Meghan."

Ty drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Come in.” He closed the door behind Jason, subtly adjusted himself in his jeans and walked to the bedroom. “This isn’t over,” he growled in a low voice to her before calling Meghan outside.

Julia had just avoided a very big mistake. She should have been thankful Jason had saved her from sure disaster. But she wasn’t. Even knowing Ty would bed her and leave her, like all the others he’d dated, Julia wanted a taste of that passion. How stupid. She knew better than most what heartache could do. If she could keep the relationship strictly sexual, she’d have done it already. But she was more than half in love with the stubborn man and had been for years.

Her stupid crush had blossomed into what she suspected was a bad case of puppy love. Considering male foxes were called dogs, she didn’t think the term puppy love all that far from the mark.

“So I hear you saw Ned again,” Jason said in a somber voice. “I’m sorry, Julia. I tried to talk him out of this obsession, but when Ned gets something into his head, he won’t quit.”

“I don’t get it. Why the whole marriage thing?”

Jason shrugged. “Mom’s tired of waiting. She’s been after Ned to settle down for a while, but he hasn’t seen anyone he likes as much as he likes you. My mom wants grandkids, and she wants to see her sons married. That’s part of the reason she’s so in love with Meghan. Not that Meghan isn’t terrific on her own,” he hastened to say with a flush.

He seemed so young and innocent that Julia felt like an ogre for stepping in the way of true love—if that’s indeed what it was.

Meghan rushed out of the bedroom and into his arms. “Oh, Jason. It’s been awful.”

Gabby rolled her eyes behind her. Ty joined them, a disgruntled frown on his face.

Jason soothed her sister with a skill Julia expected he’d honed after many such instances of exaggerated worry. “Honey, I’m sorry about today. But tomorrow night will be better. You can meet the rest of the family at dinner. They’re not all as bad as Ned and my brothers.”

Meghan added, “Jason’s mother is sweet.”

Julia knew why Meghan didn’t mention Jason’s father, Ned Senior. A bigger chauvinist Julia had yet to meet.

Ty answered for them all. “We’ll come to dinner tomorrow night. Thanks, Jason. I’m Ty, Julia’s boyfriend, by the way.”

“Oh boy,” Jason breathed. “I’m pleased to meet you, and I apologize in advance for whatever Ned’s going to do to make your life miserable. My brother really, really likes Julia.”

“So I gathered.” Ty glanced from Jason to Meghan and to the sparkling ring on her finger. “I see you two are engaged.”

Jason nodded. Meghan beamed before shooting Julia the famous Easton death glare. Julia grudgingly agreed with Ty—her sister should have majored in theater.

“When did that happen?”

“Just last week. Imagine our surprise when Julia and Gabby showed up to *congratulate* us.” Meghan said in an overly sweet voice.

Julia didn’t appreciate the brat’s tone.

“Julia, easy,” Gabby whispered. In a louder voice, she said to Meghan and Jason, “We were happy but surprised. You haven’t introduced Jason to the rest of the family yet.”

Meghan ignored the gentle reprimand. “It’s great to have you guys here to celebrate. And Ty too. Wow.” She batted her eyes.

Ty said something under his breath Julia probably didn’t want to hear.

The silver foxes were going to pitch a fit when they heard Meghan had involved herself with an outsider.

First she’d need permission from the clan to date him. For anything more serious than that, the town council would become involved. Anything that compromised Cougar Falls as a whole fell under town jurisdiction. It made sense, though the idea of asking permission to date someone felt like a restraint even Julia didn’t necessarily like.

As rebellious as Meghan was, Julia knew the girl would marry Jason if for no other reason than to prove a point. Perhaps if the clan gave her permission to at least date, without a defiant need to spite her family, Meghan might gradually end her association with Jason. A nice enough young man, but he’d never be family.

“Ah, would you excuse us for a minute? Jason, Meghan, don’t go anywhere.” She pulled Ty with her into the bedroom and closed the door behind them.

“Now, Julia?” Ty glanced at the bed, a spark of humor in his eyes. “I’m ready, but I have a feeling you’re a screamer. If you don’t mind being loud in front of your family, I don’t care.” His fingers moved to his belt buckle, and she hurried to stop him.

“Cut it out, smartass,” she hissed. Realizing her hand covered his and that the backs of her fingers lay against his belly, she quickly retreated. “I have an idea.”

“I have several of my own.” His heavy-lidded gaze did weird things to her libido.

“Ty, shut up and listen. I think Meghan’s in lust with this kid.”

“Kid? He’s what, four or five years younger than you?”

“He’s a kid,” she said again. “Meghan’s always bucking authority. Maybe if the clan council gives its permission for her to date an outsider, she’ll decide he’s not worth the hassle and come home.”

“But she’s already dating him. She’s engaged to him.”

“The council doesn’t know that.”

“Ah. I see. You want me to pretend I don’t know about that ring on her finger, that it?”

“Yes. I was thinking that if you, as the sheriff, added your weight, the council might actually approve of Jason. Not that I want her to be with an outsider. I just want her to see him as a real person and not an excuse to irritate the council, the town and me.” Julia didn’t like playing the role of mother to her younger sisters, but someone had needed to take charge. If only Meghan would see how much Julia cared, that she didn’t try to run her sister’s life for the hell of it, but to protect her from the harsh realities life had to offer.

She held her breath, waiting for Ty’s answer.

He responded with hesitation. “I don’t know, Julia. Seems to me Jason’s family really is a threat. What if she actually wants to marry him?”

“She doesn’t.” *I love him, Julia.* Meghan’s words bothered her, but Julia ignored them. Meghan was too young to know what she wanted. What the hell did Meghan know about love? *Love* had torn their parents apart before Meghan was born.

“Well...”

“Jason’s okay, Ty. And it’s not like they’ll really be getting married. This is another one of Meghan’s phases.” To Jason’s credit, after a year of dating, he still treated Meghan with respect. He didn’t seem to fit in with his oddball family, luckily for him. Because if he stepped so much as one foot out of line, Julia would kick his ass from Nowhere back to Seattle and away from her sister.

Ty’s doubt unnerved her. Hell, he wasn’t going to help. She needed his support to influence the clan council, and even the town council if it came to that. The silver fox held a lot of respect in town, respect he’d more than earned.

“Ty, please.”

He studied her with those quicksilver eyes. “I’ll support Jason with the council...*if* you agree to certain conditions.”

“Conditions?” Trust Ty to screw things up even more than they were. “God, why did you have to show up today?” She pulled at her hair, wondering if Aunt Lynn would arrive and make things worse.

“Now, now, honey. Yes or no?”

“First, tell me what *conditions* means.”

“Yes or no?” he asked again, his soft voice menacing enough to make the hair stand up on the back of her neck. Threatening bastard.

“Yes, yes,” she grumbled. “Fine.”

“Seal it with a kiss.” He grinned and stood with his thumbs in his belt loops, waiting.

She’d give him a kiss... Julia yanked his head down to hers and plastered his mouth with a doozy. Tongue and teeth and lips, until Ty tried to pull her closer. If she didn’t watch herself, she’d all too easily fall under his spell again.

She tore her mouth free. “Signed, sealed and delivered,” she said in a breathy voice. “Now let’s get out there and tell Meghan we’ll support her to the council.”

"You're a cruel woman," Ty moaned, rubbing his arousal through his jeans. "I just willed this away, Julia. Damn."

"I'll meet you out there." *Try to outsmart me, will you?*

After taking a moment to bury her own lust, she found Gabby, Meghan and Jason involved in a lively discussion about computers. Watching the trio, Julia noticed how happy Meghan looked sitting with Jason, hand in hand. A twinge of uncertainty hit her. Was Meghan really in love with him?

"There you are." Gabby smirked. Her sister knew all about Julia's fixation on Ty, thanks to Julia's intolerance for anything alcoholic. That one night she'd let slip her secret crush not only to Ty, but to her sister as well. What a disaster.

"Ty and I were talking."

"Just talking?" Gabby murmured.

Ignoring her, Julia continued. "Ty thinks he can talk the family into meeting Jason and you in Seattle in the near future."

Meghan blinked. "Really?"

"If Jason really loves you, and you really love him, I'm sure we can work something out. After all, what's a future without family?"

Jason smiled. Gabby looked stunned.

Meghan let go of Jason and leapt to her feet. She hugged Julia tight. "Thank you, sis. This means so much to me."

"Jason still has to pass muster," she whispered as she hugged Meghan back.

"He will. He's the best." Meghan stepped back and wiped her eyes. "Jason and I are going out for a while. Gabby wants to come with us."

"No, that's not—"

Ty interrupted. "Great idea. That way your sister and I can talk about our own plans for the future." He walked behind Julia and put his arms around her, squeezing her back to his front. He rested his chin on her head.

"That is so cute," Gabby gushed as she studied them. "You two look perfect together."

Julia was *so* going to get her sister for this. "Gee, thanks, Gabby."

"I can see I'm not wanted," Gabby teased and gestured to Meghan and Jason. "Let's go, you two. We'll pick up lunch out in town and bring back something for dinner."

"My treat," Jason promised.

The three of them waved goodbye and left.

Julia tried to pull away but Ty held her tight. She couldn't miss his erection prodding her back.

Jason's vehicle sounded loud in the silence before the rumble of its motor died as he drove away.

"Now, foxy lady, it's just you and me."

Chapter Three

Ty had been waiting forever to have Julia all to himself. But he knew better than to rush things. The woman wanted him. Hell, he could smell her musk right now and it was killing him. The fact she made no move to act on her lust gave him pause. He wanted Julia—now, to date, as a girlfriend. He refused to entertain thoughts of forever. Despite what his family and friends constantly urged him to do, he had no intention of finding a mate just yet.

He liked dating. Yes, he'd grown tired of it lately. That didn't mean the urge wouldn't hit him after this dry spell. He didn't want Julia just for sex, though he wouldn't say no to it. He liked female companionship. Unlike what the rumors in town hinted, Ty didn't fuck every woman he dated. He'd been out with foxes, bears, a few raptors. But nothing serious. Only a select few made it to his bedroom, and those few hadn't lasted beyond physical entertainments. When Ty eventually mated, he'd take a fox as wife. But not now. Now he wanted to play and have fun.

Except he had to keep reminding himself of that fact, because lately, he wanted something else.

Not a soul-deep connection. That was Gerald's thing. The idiot lawyer wanted a woman to marry. Ty just wanted a girlfriend he wouldn't tire of after three dates. They'd have dinner, spend time together, and yeah, indulge in red-hot sex.

Julia could give him all that and more. But she wouldn't give it up easily. The chase fired his blood, and he grinned when she squirmed in his hold. He grew harder just thinking about outfoxing her.

"Let me go." She huffed when he did and turned around, glaring at him.

Ty smiled and began unbuttoning his shirt. Most Shifters treated nudity with a casual regard. Ty didn't much care if anyone saw him without clothes, and he admitted to liking the look of a female without encumbrance. But he normally didn't get a hard-on around anyone but Julia.

Her gaze was glued to his fingers, he noted with satisfaction.

"Wh-what are you doing?" she asked.

"What does it look like?" He stripped off his shirt and moved to his belt buckle. With slow movements, he undid his belt and unbuttoned his jeans. The pull of his zipper sounded overly loud in the sudden silence.

Julia cleared her throat. His little fox looked wild around the eyes.

He toed off his boots, then bent down and took off his socks before straightening again. Hell of a thing with a hard-on the size of Montana.

With a grimace, he forced himself to behave and continued to watch Julia as he undressed. Her full lips opened on a gasp as he pushed his jeans and underwear to the floor.

“Why are you, ah...? That is, what do you...?”

Gratified by her rapid breathing, Ty stood there letting her look her fill. *This is what you’ve been missing, honey. All this is yours. All you have to do is ask.* He could feel how hard he pulsed, knew there had to be some precome there at his tip. The woman had a powerful hold on his sex drive, no doubt.

“Julia? You okay?” he teased, liking this side of her. At work she always seemed so put together. Her clothes just right, never a hair out of place. Classy, pristine. Right now she seemed anything but. Her jeans and large denim shirt were rumpled. Her hair was wild, framing her face with the untamed look it deserved. And her breathing definitely told him she was anything but calm.

“I’m fine.” She exhaled on a whoosh. “Just worried about my sister.” Her gaze continued to stray to his cock.

When she licked her lips again, it was all he could do not to start stroking himself, willing her to go down on him.

Instead, he waited for her to meet his gaze again. When she did, she turned scarlet.

He gave her a wicked grin. “I’m going to turn and check out the surrounding woods. Wait for me here, would you?”

“Ah, yeah. Sure.” She tried to shutter her gaze, but Ty knew she wanted him. He could smell her desire. He needed some space before he took advantage of her. God forbid he actually give her what she really wanted. She might not speak to him for a year.

“Oh and, Julia?”

“Yeah?”

“When I get back, we’ll take care of this.” He gripped himself, stroking a few times to entrance her. “And that sultry scent of yours, begging for some attention.”

Satisfied when she gaped in shock, he flowed into the body of his animal spirit, a silver fox, and trotted to the door.

“You’re a real pain in the ass, Ty. You give me a headache.” Julia swore under her breath and opened the back door a crack. He slipped through and laughed when she slammed it behind him. Outside, the world beckoned. But his heart raced more for the stubborn vixen inside than all the wonders nature had to offer.

Julia fanned herself, wondering if she had time to take care of her desire before Ty returned. She’d never been so aroused in her life. Ty had a body made for sex. So thick, so sexy. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the door. Just her luck she’d be in the middle of masturbating and he’d return, or worse yet, he’d be waiting, watching from some unknown place outside.

Women didn't get super horny. Women didn't need sex to complete them. She could almost hear her Aunt Lynn lecturing her on the woes of that three letter word: S-E-X. After all, her mother's monstrous libido had paired her with a man not of the Silver Fox Clan. At least he'd been Ac-taw though.

Meghan had the right of it, in part. Silver foxes were snotty. The clan had a tendency to think in terms of bloodlines and genetic standards rather than love and affection, or so she'd been taught.

Her mother's secret, disastrous marriage to her father reinforced the point that mating within the clan prevented many an unhappy relationship.

Julia forced herself to ignore remembrances of Ty's washboard stomach, golden skin and gleaming silver gaze. The knowing bastard had all but pranced around her, holding that long shaft like an offering.

As tiny as Julia was, they'd probably have trouble fitting.

Her womb clenched.

"No way. No thoughts of sex. Bad things happen around Ty Roderick. Remember that."

Despite drinking herself into a stupor a month ago—an odd occurrence at that—Julia clearly remembered how difficult it had been to overcome her fears of rejection and ask Ty to make love to her, only to have her fears realized.

"Liquid courage, my ass," she mumbled. "More like liquid stupidity."

Still, wanting Ty made a strange kind of sense, from a mating perspective. The sheriff of Cougar Falls, he had the respect, power and strength one looked for in a husband, if one was so inclined to marry. Meghan's *intended*, Jason Williams, came from pure human stock. He had no ties to the Ac-taw, none to Cougar Falls, and a family that scared the crap out of Julia. She could all too easily imagine Ned mounting her sister's head to the wall. Or better yet, stuffing her like the family dog and displaying her like a beloved pet.

She sank down on the couch and closed her eyes, wondering how to handle the mess her life had become.

The first time Julia had arrived in Nowhere, she'd found herself crushed in Ned's smelly arms. He'd wanted to screw her from the get-go. Somehow, over the last three visits she'd made to Jason's hometown, Ned's desire had morphed into some crazy kind of matrimonial need. As if she'd consent to lay down with that man and have his babies.

Eww. He had hair all over him. In an effort to entice her, he'd stripped off his shirt to wrestle Itchy and Snitchy during one visit. The scent of an unwashed Ned, along with sex from one of the locals he'd bedded before coming home, had made her want to gag. Yeah, Julia had no doubt Ned knew less about fidelity than he did about courtship.

"No way Meghan actually thought Ned and I were a couple." She snorted. Then again, Meghan was in an all-about-me phase. Like a damned teenager all over again.

The girl had smarts. She'd graduated summa cum laude, along with Jason, with a B.S. in Computer Science. Meghan had plans to start her own engineering software business, again like Jason. At least their chosen careers made the prospect of living in Nowhere undesirable. In Seattle, a technology haven, they'd do much better—better even than in Cougar Falls, honesty compelled her to admit.

Yet, in Cougar Falls, Meghan would be safe. The magical totem they celebrated protected the town from unwanted visitors. Those not of Ac-taw blood could literally not see the town. It wasn't on any map, and only Shifters could find it, be they town citizens or not. If Jason accompanied Meghan home, he'd be aware of the place. But the minute he left the town's confines, he'd never find it again without help.

Julia wasn't sure exactly how it worked, but she'd heard the horror stories, had seen those who tried to live on the outside. Hunters, the pressure to pretend, and the inability to shift when needed without fear of exposure could truly harm her kind. Her new friend Sophie could attest to that. Living among normal people for most of her life, Sophie had nearly scared herself to death the first time she'd turned. Thankfully an Ac-taw had found her and taken her under his wing, eventually bringing her to Cougar Falls.

The gray wolves had a few Orders around the country. One in Texas, another in Wisconsin. Sure, Ac-taw could live outside of Cougar Falls, but the threat of publicity about their kind endangered not only individuals, but the entire Shifter species. Each and every Ac-taw in the States had gone through the clans in Cougar Falls at some point to establish their own territories. Which made Sophie's case so unusual.

Julia sighed. She loved her sisters, but she missed home. She missed sitting in her comfortable office typing up files and answering calls for Gerald. Her boss and friend, Gerald made her feel good about herself. Though many of the silver foxes had expressed interest in mating, she didn't want to tie herself down. Not yet. Eventually she'd have to find someone special. She even wanted to have children. But deep down she worried about how they'd turn out.

If anyone learned the truth... The silver foxes might very well kick her and her sisters out of the clan. Hell, they worried about social status more than the flighty raptors. If they decided to expel Julia and her sisters, they'd have to leave town. Julia couldn't imagine life away from Cougar Falls, which was why she worried so for Meghan.

The only good thing about her younger sister marrying Jason and living in Seattle was that as long as she kept her shifting private, no one would care what she turned into.

Groaning at the reminder of that one major stress she'd been dealing with in her well-ordered world, Julia decided to sink into oblivion. Maybe a good sleep would clear her thoughts.

She prayed not to dream of Ty.

She did anyway.

Ty raced through the woods, feeling free for the first time in days. He found evidence of nearby foxes and wolves, but no one minded his pass through their territory, mostly because he refrained from marking anywhere but the few places he needed to find his way home.

On his way, he passed a group of kits protectively guarded by a pissed-off mother. Cute little red foxes. Their curious faces surprised him by stirring in him a need to look after his own family, which didn't exist. Of course thoughts like those swayed his recollections to Julia.

Again he remembered her that night weeks ago, when she'd asked him so nicely, with alcohol on her breath, to make love to him. The first night off he'd had in forever, no trouble on the horizon. He'd planned to spend it with his friends drinking himself silly. Instead, he'd helped Julia get home and into bed, ignored her plea to fuck, and spent his night alone, masturbating to thoughts of how good she'd actually be in bed.

And now he was trying to run through the woods with a hard-on. He stopped, panting, and sniffed around for the stream he'd recently passed. He found it up ahead and drank to relieve his thirst.

After sating himself, he entered a small, unoccupied enclosure near some boulders and curled up for a rest. He really had been up all day and night. Panicked to find her, he'd made sure, at least, that Gerald had things well in hand to help Sarah before he'd left. If the bears and wolves ate each other in the meantime, so be it. And as far as the silver foxes trying to pass that new mandate about mating...so long as they paired him with Julia, he didn't care.

Fuzzy with exhaustion, he didn't consider marriage to the shifty fox a bad thing. He fell asleep dreaming about what should have been.

"Please, Ty. Make love to me. I want you." Julia sighed, her breath sweet with alcohol and something else.

Ty parted his lips, allowing the scent of her to linger on his tongue. He hadn't wanted anyone this badly, ever. Though that should have worried him, at the moment, he didn't care. A better man than him would tell her no, wouldn't take advantage of her soft plea. But Ty needed her.

He stripped out of his clothing, incredibly aroused. He took his time removing Julia's clothes. He'd seen her undressed before. Each and every time he'd had to hide his erection. Now he proudly showed her what she did to him as he slid her shirt to the floor and followed it with her skirt.

To his shock, she wore no underclothes. Her small, perfect breasts fit in his hands as if made for him. Her nipples stabbed his palms as he cupped her, and she moaned his name like a prayer.

"Suck them, Ty. Yes," she whispered when he lowered his head. He took first one then the other nipple in his mouth. With gentle bites he sucked her closer to orgasm. Her need hit him hard, the scent of her heat one that would carry past her house to the other males around them.

Ty needed to claim her, to mingle his semen within her ripe body. Except Julia didn't want to wait. She pushed him away, all vixen now, and dropped to the floor. On her hands and knees, she crawled to him, her eyes like cinnamon beads, her rich, dark red hair shining under the dim light of a nearby lamp.

So sleek and pretty. For a small woman, she moved like she owned the world. And she owned him, of that there was no doubt. Ty stood on shaky legs, watching with narrowed eyes as she approached. She didn't stop, stalking him like a true predator.

She kissed her way up his legs, from his calves to his knees to his thighs.

Trembling with need, he let her spread his legs wider. Her hot breath excited his tight sac, and then she ran her tongue along his shaft, catching the falling drop of come from his slit. Her mouth closed over him, so slowly, like ecstatic torture he never wanted to end...

Ty frowned, wanting Julia to take all of him, when a foreign voice that didn't belong anywhere near her intruded. "I'm telling you, something's not right about that bastard."

He blinked into darkness and wondered how long he'd been out.

"So beat the shit out of him, take Julia and fuck her out of your system. Hell, if you're really set on making Mama happy, marry her and give Mama that grandkid she's wanting," one of Ned's brothers said.

"Yeah, what Dave said. That way she'll leave us alone," the other added.

Their footsteps approached, the crunching of branches giving way under large boots.

"With Jason taking Meghan, that little shithead will finally be out of our hair."

"Kid's not bad," Dave said.

"He doesn't belong, and you know it," Ned replied, his deep baritone impossible to mistake. "What the hell did he need to go to school for? Only thing he's good for is giving Mama money when she needs it. Meghan's a hot piece, I'll give you that. Not as hot as Julia though."

Ty growled and the men froze.

"You hear that?" the other Williams brother asked.

"Sounded close." Someone cocked a rifle.

Ty stilled. He couldn't see them, and he had no idea if they were all armed or not.

"Point is, I need that fucker away from Julia. Woman's being stubborn as all get-out, but I know she wants it. Maybe if I promise to put a ring on her, she'll settle down. That's all any of them want, anyway. Marriage." Ned snorted. "But you know, Julia's different from the women in town. I can't explain it, but there's something kind of wild about her."

She'll rip your balls off and feed them to you, Ty wanted to snarl. Instead he lay still, listening.

"I bet she's hot as hell in the sack."

"But she's so little."

"Perfect for me," Ned boasted. "Wonder how much cock she can take?"

"Man, I wonder if Gabby'd like to hang around?" Dave asked.

"All the sisters are fine. Too bad Jason won't share. Little idiot thinks he's too smart for us. Maybe you're right. Maybe it's good he's moving away," the other brother commented.

"So what, you want to go back and deal with this Roderick guy or what?"

Ned answered, "No. Not yet. I want him to meet Dad first. With all of us there together, he'll shit a brick for sure. I'll take him aside, talk to him nice-like." His brothers snickered. "Then he'll leave town and leave Julia behind. Once she sees the real me, she'll be begging for it. Hell, if she's as good as she looks, maybe I really will marry her, and she and I can get to work on making Mama those grandkids."

"And if she doesn't want to?"

"She will." Ned's surety raised Ty's hackles. "One way or another, that woman's going to belong to me. No one says no to Ned Williams."

Long after they left, Ty followed their path back to their truck. He then trailed their tracks through the woods toward a rundown house full of people. At least a half dozen wandered in and out of a wood and brick house. Off to the left sat a barn full of tools and a still, complete with moonshine and the requisite old men reminiscing to fit the picture. A family reunion, Ned had said. Terrific.

Quietly, Ty skirted the barn and trotted around the house, only to come nose to nose with a Husky sleeping downwind. The dog opened his eyes in a flash and let out a series of warning growls and barks. The only thing keeping him back was the chain around his throat.

Ty slipped away from the attention drawing near and ran back into the woods.

"Damn, that's the second fox I've seen this week. Not as red as the other one that keeps hanging around, though. Get your gun, son. Time to go huntin'."

A glance over his shoulder showed an older version of Ned—same large frame, same dirty brown hair but threaded with gray, same mean, squinty brown gaze.

Then what he'd said dawned on Ty, and he raced back the way he'd come. *Not as red as the other one.*

Ty was going to paddle Julia silly for putting herself in danger. Because he knew, without a doubt, that Julia had been staking out the perceived threat to protect her sisters.

He'd put an end to that. The vixen wouldn't put herself in danger anymore, not now that she had Ty to protect her.

The return trip through the woods took a long time. His run no longer freeing, Ty felt every mile between himself and Julia like one great distance he had to breach. When he saw the light of her cabin glowing in the distance, he sighed with relief. Not only tired, but hungry and annoyed as well, Ty had a few choice words to share with Julia, Gabby and Meghan.

He froze outside the back door, catching Jason's scent. *Dammit, I forgot about dinner with him.*

Making up his mind, he scratched at the back door and let out a yip.

“Did you hear that? I’ll be right back,” Julia said loud enough to be heard back in Cougar Falls. Obviously his woman hadn’t mastered the art of subtlety.

His woman?

The minute she opened the door and looked at him, everything clicked.

Hell yes, his woman. *For now, just for now*, the independent male inside him reminded.

“*Open a back window. And hurry the hell up,*” he shared with a snarl, eager to yell at her for daring to skirt the Williams homestead.

Ac-taw in their animal forms spoke using body language and a shared telepathy with others of their kind. Communication was generally not a problem. Unless the stubborn woman you were trying to talk to slammed the door in your face.

With a wry grin at the gauntlet she’d thrown, Ty mentally picked it up. *That’s right, baby. Game on. Nobody outmaneuvers Ty Roderick, not even one very delectable, sexy female. And I’m really going to enjoy making you pay.*

Chapter Four

Julia contained her shout and pasted a smile on her face. “Must have been an animal scratching at the door. No one’s there,” she said in a loud voice. Meghan’s and Gabby’s relief mirrored her own. What the hell did Ty think by worrying them all? He’d been gone for nearly nine hours!

Jason, Gabby and Meghan had brought back Chinese takeout they’d lugged all the way from Kettle Falls, nearly twenty miles away. The food tasted like dust in Julia’s mouth, worry for Ty making it hard to think about anything else.

She made an excuse about needing to use the restroom and left the kitchen. Hurrying to her bedroom, she opened the window and waited. She’d been using it to come and go while visiting. A fat tree stump under the window facilitated her entry into the house.

Ty jumped through with effortless grace. Greedily drinking in the sight of him, she forced herself to focus on her mad.

She seethed. “Would it have killed you to let us know where you were for so long?”

Anger—much better than nervous concern.

He shook out his thick fur patterned with silver and black that darkened at the tips of his ears and his tail. He had less red on his belly, ears and throat than she did, most likely due to his dark hair when a man. He was also rather large for a silver fox, closer to fifteen pounds, as opposed to her nine when turned. Still, she couldn’t deny how handsome he looked.

Unable to stop herself, she knelt and ran her hand over his head. Scratching his ears, she scolded in a low voice, “You stay out that long again and I’ll go out and drag you back by the tail.”

He shifted into a man so fast he knocked her on her butt then laid her flat against the floor. He blanketed her with male heat, his face inches from hers as he stared into her eyes.

A pure show of dominance that, dammit all, worked.

“You ever go near the Williams place again and I’ll spank you until you can’t sit. Those bastards are armed to the teeth with guns, bows and rifles. There are over a dozen people at that house right now. Don’t even *think* about leaving again without me with you.”

She opened her mouth to reply and found it covered with his own.

Julia couldn’t help but respond. What else could she do when a hot naked man kissed the breath out of her?

She moaned and ran her hands over his back and up to his neck. His hair felt so soft under her fingers as she caressed his scalp and submitted to his ravenous mouth.

He stroked her lips and tongue with his, fanning the desire she could never quite shake in his presence. His touch grew more urgent. He caged her, sharing his arousal with every thrust and push against her. His hand cupped her breast, then slid under her shirt to pinch her nipple through her bra.

She gasped at the contact, and he invaded her mouth, deepening the kiss.

The muted sound of a door opening and then closing after Gabby's "Oh, Lord," barely registered.

Suddenly Ty's hand angled down her pants and his fingers sought the wet heat of her.

He groaned her name and shoved his fingers inside, stroking her wet channel. His thumb found her clit and he brought her closer and closer to climax while he rocked against her.

Stealing her breath, her resistance, her every thought, he gave her nothing but pleasure and worked her sensitive flesh. Her entire body and mind cried out for him as she convulsed against him, her orgasm spiraling out of control. Thankfully he swallowed her shout of relief, or she would have shared it with the rest of the house.

He shuddered and groaned, nipping along her throat. Helpless, Julia trembled in the aftermath of such an explosive, sudden rapture.

Breathing heavily, they stared at one another for what seemed like forever. She didn't know what Ty thought or felt, but Julia wanted to burst into tears. Sex with Ty, and sex that wasn't even real sex, had been better than anything she'd ever experienced or had hoped to experience. Because it was Ty, the physical connection meant so much more than a mere fuck.

The love she tried to squelch threatened to break free, until he said, "Oh hell. I didn't mean to make such a mess. Sorry, honey. At least your sister didn't get that much of an eyeful."

Julia's eyes widened. "What was I thinking?" she squeaked, horrified to be caught having sex by her younger sister. So much for making an example of herself with dignity and control.

"If you were like me, you weren't thinking at all." Ty grinned down at her. "You're amazing, baby. Next time, I'm coming inside you. So damned warm." He kissed her and leapt to his feet. He grabbed his clothes off her dresser and disappeared into the adjoining bathroom.

Julia looked down at her stained shirt and shuddered. She wanted to say in horror, but she knew it was much worse than that. She liked wearing Ty's scent. She wanted everyone to smell him on her, to know that she'd brought him to such bliss.

"I'm such an animal," she muttered and stalked to the closet. She tore off her shirt, forced herself to ball it up and throw it into the hamper, and grabbed a sweatshirt she hurriedly donned. Then realizing her underwear stuck to her thanks to her explosive orgasm, she changed out of the pair, put on a new set and zipped up her jeans. She needed to use the bathroom before she returned to her sisters, fearing they'd smell his seed all over her and know what she'd been doing.

But they already know that. Gabby saw.

She cringed, hearing them and Jason in the kitchen.

Ty opened the door, fully dressed, and kissed her as he passed. "I'll go out the window and knock on the front door. Later, beautiful."

His good mood soured her already increasing temper. Perfect. Now on top of everything else, Ty was going to think he'd one-upped her in their war of wills. *Typical alpha male*, she thought with a grimace as she cleaned herself in the bathroom. *Give him an orgasm and he thinks he owns you.*

Come on, after that orgasm he does.

Annoyed by her lack of willpower, she counseled herself to remain strong. Tonight had never happened, and it wouldn't happen again. Sex with Ty would lead to loving Ty. And with his pedigree, he'd never mate someone like her. God forbid he learn about the skeletons in her closet. Mr. Rules would drum Julia and her family out of the clan in a heartbeat.

Taking a deep breath, she warned herself to handle Ty carefully. Now she just had to ignore Gabby's smarmy attitude. Her younger sister always had to be right. She'd been saying for years how perfect Ty and Julia would be as a couple. Then to learn Julia had an unrequited longing for the man... And of course it *had* to be Gabby who'd walked in on them moments ago.

Talk about rotten luck. Julia joined the rest of the group eating dinner just as Ty knocked on the front door.

"I'll get it," Jason offered and moved to the door.

Gabby gave her a thumbs-up, whispered in Meghan's ear, and the pair grinned at her like twin idiots.

"Oh hell," she muttered, not pleased at all when Ty entered and made a beeline to her. He looped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her in for a quick kiss, one that had possession stamped all over it.

Gabby's clear satisfaction annoyed her even more.

"What?" she snapped, daring her sister to say one word about what she'd seen.

"Nothing. Not a thing." Gabby smiled at Ty. "Hungry, Ty?"

He winked at her. "Famished." The bastard slid a sly look Julia's way. "Nothing like a hard ride to work up an appetite."

Gabby choked on her drink.

"Oh?" Jason asked.

"Friend of mine lives nearby. I borrowed his truck and made a sweep of the area, just to get acquainted with the town. You guys really need to pave your roads. I like a smooth ride," he added with enough suggestion to turn Julia's cheeks beet red. So he'd noticed she shaved regularly. Terrific.

Meghan smothered a giggle.

"Have some noodles, *please*." *And shut up before I hurt you.* She dumped a pile of food on his plate, sighing with relief when he finally started eating.

"This is great. Thanks, Jason."

Jason smiled and made small talk.

Julia couldn't eat any more. She wanted a drink, preferably something stronger than a cola. Then again, the last time she'd had alcohol, she'd tried, unsuccessfully, to molest Ty. She had no head for booze. One beer and she grew tipsy.

"So, Gabby," Ty said when Jason paused to engage Meghan in conversation. "I'd like to apologize for anything you saw earlier. Your sister makes me lose my head and I—"

Julia slapped a hand over his mouth and pointed at her sister. "Not one more word."

Gabby shrugged in innocence. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Exactly."

Ty licked her hand and she hastily withdrew it. "Hmm, tasty."

Meghan smiled. "Think of it this way, Julia. You're not the cat lady anymore." She laughed so hard she cried.

Gabby looked smug. Jason wanted to know what was so funny.

Julia couldn't take any more. "Jason, did you drink all those beers you brought over the other day?"

"Nope. There are still a few in the fridge."

"Good."

Gabby watched her sister and Ty, pleased beyond measure Julia was finally living a little. She knew better than anyone how much Julia had sacrificed to keep their family together.

Meghan had been so young when their father left for good. He refused to stay where he wasn't wanted, not that Gabby could blame him.

After Dad left, Mom struggled to keep it together, but her heart had been broken. When she'd left Cougar Falls, no one had been surprised to find her dead, shot and stripped of her luxurious pelt. Foxes didn't live long by themselves outside the town. They'd all been devastated, but Julia had taken her death harder than any of them.

Once a curious, rebellious silver fox, she'd grown into a much more cautious, reserved Shifter who shied at anything resembling a serious relationship to keep their guardians happy. No thanks to Aunt Lynn and Uncle Harry, two frigid, snotty silver foxes masquerading as caring guardians. The whole clan wasn't as bad as her aunt and uncle, but Julia refused to look beyond her carefully placed boundaries, worried about getting her sisters kicked out of town.

Ty had been sniffing around her sister for years, but Julia didn't see it. Gabby had, and she'd subtly encouraged Ty whenever she could. Unfortunately, he had a head full of pride. Typical male. Still, he had a generous heart, standing in the community and the backbone to do the right thing even in the face of great opposition.

He'd been elected to sheriff a few years ago. The youngest one Cougar Falls had ever had. Gabby couldn't fathom the degree of patience it took to keep the peace in their nutty little town.

Sitting across from them, she watched Julia whisper something in his ear that had him frowning. They were so perfect for each other. Both gorgeous, in man's form and as foxes. Both responsible Ac-taw who cared for rules and the town as much as anything else. Ty's levity and sexy charisma tempered Julia's seriousness and her prudish mien when it came to sex. Personally, Gabby blamed Aunt Lynn for that.

Gabby could care less about what her relatives thought. But perhaps that was because she knew she'd never belong.

Unfortunately, silver foxes had a reputation for not tolerating differences. If one of her relatives had been a bear, she could have found solace with the Bear Clan. They accepted anyone with even a hint of bear in them. The Catamounts had several kinds of Shifter in their clan. But those other Ac-taw were good friends of Burke Chastell, men he'd known for years. Gabby didn't know Burke well, and she wasn't normal, even by Ac-taw standards. And neither were her sisters.

"What are you staring at?" Julia asked, defensive.

Gabby realized the table had grown silent while she gazed at her sister, woolgathering. "Oh, nothing. Just contemplating the glow of love between you two. Or should I say, you four?"

She ignored Julia's scowl and Ty's raised brow. Oh, the stubborn man could say what he wanted, but Gabby knew love when she saw it. Ty had it bad, he just hadn't admitted it to himself. Maybe Gabby should help him. Hadn't she convinced Meghan to follow her heart? Even if it was all the way out here to Nowhere?

"The one thing I don't get, Jason, is how different you are from your family," she said to diffuse the tension.

Everyone turned to Jason, who fidgeted. He was so cute. No wonder Meghan had fallen for him. Short blond hair, twinkling blue eyes and a warm smile he had specially for her little sister. Why couldn't Julia see the way the two leaned into each other so naturally?

Jason laughed with self-deprecation. "Don't think too badly of my family. I know they're out there. Problem is, my dad's a throwback. He's a chauvinist and doesn't care who knows it. I have no idea why, but Mom loves him."

Meghan chimed in, "I like your mom. She's been so nice to me." Gabby noticed she didn't mention his dad.

Jason grinned. "*Mom* is great, yeah. But Dad... Where do you think Ned gets his charm?" he asked with sarcasm. "In case any of you are wondering, Meghan and I are *not* going to live here. We're just visiting this last time to please my mother. Then Meghan and I are settling down in Seattle. Trust me, it's far enough away my family will never visit. They don't leave Nowhere. Ever."

"Good," Julia muttered.

“Julia, that wasn’t nice,” Ty chided, teasing.

Jason looked at Meghan. “So, in Seattle, I was thinking we could find a house in Queen Anne. My business is really taking off.”

Meghan gave him a wide smile. “Queen Anne or Greenlake. Sounds perfect to me. What do you guys think?”

“Cougar Falls,” Julia and Ty said at the same time.

“I vote for home too, but that’s just my opinion. You know what they say, Meghan.” Gabby turned a toothy smile on Julia and Ty. “Home is where the heart is.”

The next night, sitting in the backseat of Jason’s truck with Ty and Gabby, Julia grimaced as they drew closer to the Williams’ homestead. On twenty acres of land surrounded by extended family property, Ned Sr. and Matilda Williams might as well have started their own town. Visions of a compound run by rednecks and Shifter killers haunted her, until Ty slid his finger along her cheek.

“Relax, honey. No one there’s going to eat you. Now me, on the other hand...”

She huffed and shook her head, but she felt better all the same.

“Don’t worry, Julia. Tilda’s really nice. And you have Ty to protect you from Ned,” Meghan offered from the front seat, sitting next to Jason.

“Great,” Julia muttered.

She would have preferred to drive her own vehicle, or at least ridden with Ty in his. But as she’d expected, Nowhere had suddenly run dry of rubber. No tires to be found for her SUV or Ty’s truck, not until after next week. After the reunion Ned had insisted she attend.

Not liking his bullying any more now than she had before, she responded to Meghan with bite. “I don’t need Ty’s protection. I’ve been handling Ned just fine by myself.”

Jason cleared his throat. “Ah, Julia, I hate to say it, but Meghan’s right. Ned’s been telling people left and right that you’re his.”

“That’s crazy. Does he really think he can force me to be his girlfriend?”

“I think so.”

“How? By threatening my sisters?” Ned had no idea what he was getting into if he did. Julia possessed very sharp teeth she didn’t mind using.

“Not at all,” Jason answered, but he didn’t sound so sure. “I’d never let him hurt Meghan or any of you.”

“If you could stop him,” Ty added. “No offense, Jason. But your brother’s an asshole. Soon as this little side trip tonight is done, we’re leaving.”

Julia bristled at him speaking for her, but Gabby grabbed her arm and tightened her fingers. “Fine. But only because I’m more than ready to leave.”

Jason sighed. “That might be for the best. Meghan and I’ll head back to Seattle too. I’ll talk to Mom about it. She’ll understand.”

Julia mumbled under her breath, “I wish Meghan understood. She needs to come home with us.” Meghan, predictably, didn’t turn around. Like Ned, her youngest sister tended to hear only what she wanted to.

They reached the house all too soon. Ned and his brothers greeted them on the porch.

Bob scratched his shoulder, and she saw Gabby smile at the motion. “Itchy” was so appropriate.

“Hell, Jason. Nice to see you could join us, finally.” Snitchy—Dave—grinned and put Jason in a headlock. “Hey, Meghan. Ned’s been pining for your sister.” He leered at Gabby. “Mama wants to meet the girls who’ve put her sons in such a dither. Her word, not mine.”

Julia hadn’t realized Snitchy could clean up so well. He wore pressed jeans and an unwrinkled shirt. When he winked at her, she almost wanted to smile back at him. And Itchy, despite his constant scratching, looked and acted presentable. Had she made a mistake condemning Jason’s family because of Ned?

“‘Bout fucking time,” Ned muttered and glared at Ty.

“Guess her *boyfriend* held them up,” Snitchy sneered.

No, not a mistake. Ned was still an ass. His brothers were still lemmings at heart.

Though his lips curled in pleasure when he looked at her, anger shone in his eyes. “Nice to see you again, Julia.” Ned’s fake smile annoyed her. As did the meaty hand he reached out for her.

Ty slid effortlessly between her and Ned, caging her in a strong arm as he guided her up the steps. “Williams.” He deliberately knocked into Ned when the larger man refused to back away from the front door. “We’ll talk later about you paying for our tires. Now, Jason, why don’t you introduce us to your mother.”

Julia hated to admit it, but she felt a whole lot safer in Ty’s arms than she would have arriving alone. Ty possessed an air of invincibility that encouraged others to believe in him. The strength and integrity inherent in the shifty but stubborn fox lent itself to trust. She’d seen more Ac-taw back down from a fight simply because of the way he looked at them. Like he could see into a body’s very soul.

Kind of the way he’d looked at her yesterday.

His hand tightened around her shoulder, and he kissed her on the head as they entered the house. Instead of calming her, his innocent kiss aroused her.

She still couldn’t believe she’d had almost-sex with Ty Roderick. And he wanted to do it again, to come inside of her. God willing, she could resist another tryst, because where Ty was concerned, Julia had little sense. Her only defense against him for so many years had been to remain aloof, to act as if she didn’t see him, when in reality he was all she ever saw.

Every time he came into the office to talk to Gerald, when she saw him around town, or when he spoke at the Silver Fox Clan meetings, her animal soul cried out for him. The fox inside her knew she’d

found something special in the male, but Julia couldn't afford to trust him. Not when her family's existence in Cougar Falls depended upon keeping the deep, dark family secret. Sometimes she really hated her parents for falling in love. She snorted. More like an unfathomable lust and selfish need for pleasure.

"Um, Julia?" Ty stared down at her. "You okay? I'm sensing some real distress, baby."

"You can smell that?" she whispered, conscious of all the men coming out of the woodwork. A lot of relatives joined them in the large living room.

"That, and your nails are digging into my forearm," he whispered back.

She immediately released him.

"That's better. Now we can hold hands." He gave her a smug smile and tugged her after him.

Ned stood with his brothers and father, glaring at Ty. Jason's mother seemed to be a sweetheart, and his uncles and cousins had manners the younger Williams men sorely lacked. Apparently, Ned Sr. was the hardhead in his generation, and most of his progeny took after him.

Hell, every family had a black sheep. She glanced at Meghan and exhaled with frustration.

One of Jason's uncles on his mother's side said, "Don't mind the Neds, as we call them. Bunch of stubborn morons. We're pleased as punch to have Jason and Meghan for a visit. And it's right nice of your sisters to visit as well, Meghan."

Meghan blushed and sat next to Tilda, Jason's mom. "Well, I haven't been home much since college. And Jason and I are planning to live in Seattle far away from all of you, so it's nice to be with family again." She dared Julia to contradict her with a sharp smile.

"So you're not going to go live back home?" Tilda asked.

"No."

Ned and his brothers joined them. "Where is it you're from again?" he asked. He kept his attention on Julia while he spoke. "I don't remember Meghan or Jason saying."

"It's a small town near Glacier Falls National Park. You wouldn't believe how cold it gets out there," Ty said with a smile at Tilda. He blatantly ignored Ned, who didn't like that one bit.

Julia bit her lip to keep from grinning. Ty had a subtle way of letting someone know his displeasure. Trust a fox to be sneaky.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Tilda said. "Last year we had a record low of thirteen degrees."

Gabby chimed in and soon everyone smiled and laughed, sharing stories ranging from the weather to Jason's antics as a young child, which had Tilda and her brothers vying to outdo one another. Ned Sr. remained conspicuously mute.

Throughout dinner, Julia enjoyed herself. Ned and his brothers remained distant. His father outright ignored them all in favor of the television and some stupid basketball game in the other room.

"Would you excuse me, please?" Ty asked Tilda.

“Bathroom’s down the hall on the right,” one of the uncles offered and threw himself into another story, this one involving Tilda and his youngest brother.

After Ty disappeared from the dining table big enough to seat sixteen comfortably, Gabby leaned in to say, “Not what you were expecting, huh?”

“Well, I can see now where Jason gets his disposition. The family’s actually quite nice, if you ignore Ned Sr. and three of his four sons.”

Gabby nodded. “Ned’s been staring at you since you arrived. You’re going to have to talk to him at some point.”

“I know. No time like the present.”

Tilda and Meghan stood to gather plates. Though the men didn’t offer to help, they did compliment her for the meal. Gabby and Julia rose as well and helped clear the table.

Julia reached for Ned’s plate. “Ned, can we talk?”

Chapter Five

Ned pushed back his chair and stood faster than she could blink. “Been waiting all night to talk to you.” He glanced in the direction Ty had gone and nodded to himself.

Julia sighed, handed Gabby the plate, then motioned to the back door. “How about on the porch?” In private. She looked pointedly at his brothers.

Itchy quickly said, “We’ll go with you.”

“Yeah. I don’t want to miss this,” Snitchy added with an evil grin.

Julia held back a growl. “Ned? I want to talk to you. *Alone.*”

He glanced from Itchy and Snitchy to her. “Good idea.” He shoved his brothers back and herded her toward the back door.

From the other room, Julia heard Ty and Ned’s father swearing over the muted sound of the television. What the hell was he doing with Ned Sr.?

The pair of them bemoaned Gonzaga and cheered Syracuse. Good Lord. He was bonding with that odious man over basketball?

Ned prodded her outside, past the surprised faces of his mother and her sister, and she shivered at the brisk wind slapping her face.

“Nice weather, huh?” He leaned against the porch rail and crossed his arms. “See, I can make small talk.”

“Ah, okay. Ned, I just wanted you to understand—”

“I cut my hair. Had Mama iron my jeans.”

She stared at him in bemusement. “Right. So I just thought we should clear the air. You don’t—”

“Don’t need fancy manners to impress a woman. I drive a big rig, did you know that? An International.”

“International?”

“Yeah. I drive a flatbed from the mill to lumber factories around the state. It’s my own rig.”

“Rig?”

“My own truck,” he said with pride. “I’m an independent contractor, Julia. Make a good living.”

“Er, okay.”

“So about Saturday—”

This time she interrupted him. “Ned, you won’t take no for an answer. You shot out the tires on my SUV!” Not to mention Ty’s tires, but she didn’t think it prudent to mention Ty just now.

He frowned. “I got angry. What the hell did you expect me to do when you’re parading around with that jackass? What do you see in a guy like that?”

Besides smarts, a sexy body and a wily fox? “I’ve known Ty since we were young. We grew up together. He’s the love of my life.” All so true, and so devastating to a young woman who had nothing to offer a prodigal son from one of the finest fox families in town.

“Love.” He snorted. “That’s not real. Hell, look around you. You really think Jason and Meghan are going to last?”

She didn’t, and the notion suddenly depressed her. She sighed. “Ned, I don’t love you. I don’t even like you half the time. The only things I know about you are that you’re a bully and you’re stubborn. You live here, right?”

He scowled. “You like me fine enough. Yeah, I live here. Nowhere is my home.”

“Well, mine is in Montana, and I don’t ever plan on leaving it.”

“You’re here now.”

Like talking to a brick wall. “I’m here for Meghan. She’s only here because of Jason. She’s leaving for Seattle in a few days.” The sooner the better. Julia preferred Seattle to this place. For all that Ned’s relatives seemed friendlier than she’d expected, there were still way too many Williamses in the area for comfort.

“Look, Julia, I know this is sudden for you. But I like you. I really like you.” He sounded so earnest.

She felt her first stirring of sympathy for the big guy. Though a bully with a temper, he had feelings. And then he finished his thought, and her empathy vanished.

“You’re fuckin’ hot. I’m the town catch. You and me together? Perfect. I’ll give it to you good, baby. And hell, things work out, maybe we’ll make a go of it. A kid would make Mama happy. I don’t see the problem.”

“You wouldn’t. Sorry to break it to you, Ned, but we—you and me—are not happening.”

The meanness returned to his gaze. Danger threatened. Flight or fight for Julia meant flight. On four feet, no one had ever managed to catch her. Unfortunately, she didn’t have the freedom to turn at random in Nowhere. She was really starting to hate this place.

“I’m sick of asking. So now I’m telling you. No one says no to Ned Williams. You’re mine.” The smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Think of it this way. I can take care of you and your sisters. Nothing bad can happen to Gabby and Meghan if I’m with you, you get me?”

His obstinacy she’d tolerated. Threats against her family ended it. Rage swelled, and the careful control she exercised at all times started to slip.

"You don't like to be told no. I get it. But I don't like to be told what to do either." He'd hurt her family if she refused him? She gave her fury full reign. Stubborn men. A sister who wouldn't listen. Relatives who hated her. Responsibilities for everything thanks to a foolish mother and an irresponsible father. No longer keeping her attitude in check, Julia railed at Ned, heaping her frustrations and indignities upon him.

"You don't own me, Ned. No one does. I'm tired of being told what to do, how to act, what to say. I don't like Nowhere. I don't like my sister falling for an outsider. I don't like arrogant assholes who think they know what's best for me and everyone around me." She poked him in the chest, startling him with her aggression. *Take that Ned, Uncle Harry, Aunt Lynn and Ty.* "I'm going home. Gabby and Meghan are coming with me. And if you so much as look at my family the wrong way, I'll cut you off at the knees."

The animal desire to defend herself came out of nowhere. A lifetime of hiding secrets, of fitting in despite her need to live her own life, and wishing for what could never be, bombarded her like sharp needles prickling at her flesh. Now, for the first time, she intended to fight. Pain pushed through her fingertips until the lethal edge of claws appeared. Her teeth pricked her gums, and the bones of her jaw tingled with the need to realign.

Ned stared in horror at her face, but she didn't care. Before she could strike out at him, Ty wrapped his arms around her from behind. She hadn't heard him approach.

"Easy, baby. It's okay. No one's forcing you to do anything you don't want to do," he crooned in her ear, his scent so alluring she inhaled deeply to take more of it in.

It took her a moment to calm down, and when she did, she noticed Ned's shock.

Hell.

"Son of a bitch," he whispered, turned on his heel without another word and slammed into the house.

Julia shook as the rage left her. Appalled to have lost control like that, she struggled in Ty's arms.

"It's okay," he said softly. "It really is. You didn't change more than your eyes and claws, a trick of the light. Everything else will keep. Don't worry. You're fine." His soothing voice transitioned her discomfort into another form altogether. Her sex throbbed as he spoke, and then his words suddenly ceased into an intense silence.

He turned her in his arms and kissed her. A wild, earthy, sexual meeting of the mouths that promised a blissful outcome if they hurried out of their clothes.

Ty ended the kiss and nipped her lip. "Damn, Julia. I want you. But our timing sucks. I'm with you on not liking this place. We need to get home." He lifted her hips and ground into her, his erection imposing and so very welcome.

Think, Julia. Sex with Ty is bad. Julia wished she could remember why, because her hormones screamed at her to finish what he teased with that kiss.

She licked the flesh of his throat then bit hard enough to leave a mark. He groaned and tightened his hold on her.

“Fuck, Julia. Stop before I come in my pants. I swear, you’re driving me crazy.”

“Hmm?” She continued to kiss him, trailing her lips down his throat to the parted V of his shirt.

“The last time I came on your shirt. I’m about to come in my pants. Stop,” he rasped when her hand slid under his jeans and wrapped around his cock. “God, you are so sexy. I’ve dreamed of taking you in so many ways.” He moaned and thrust against her palm. “If you don’t let me go, I’m going to fuck you in full view of anyone who comes out the back door.” His growly warning forced her to look up at him. The slit pupils staring back at her showed her how close he straddled the edge of reason.

With regret, she drew back. A drop of come clung to her finger and she licked it, daring him to protest.

His gaze brightened, like orbs of molten silver. “You’re really pushing it, baby. Flat on your back, my cock up that pussy. In about five seconds if you don’t turn away and walk back into the house,” he hissed.

His posture screamed dominance, and she wanted to show her belly and submit. Then turn over onto her hands and knees and present herself for a true mating, lifting her tail in the air and—

Hell, I’m really losing it. Julia jumped back as common sense returned. She blushed at the harsh look of lust on Ty’s face. “Oh, man. What was I thinking?”

“You weren’t. And neither was I.” Ty swore under his breath and shifted his arousal in his tight jeans. “Go into the house, Julia. Your scent is hell on my control. Tell Jason we need to leave. Pretend you’re sick or something. Then as soon as we get home, we’ll finish this.”

“No.” She took a deep breath for calm. “As soon as we get home, we’re leaving Nowhere. We can shift and run to the nearest town for transportation. You and I are a mistake waiting to happen.”

His eyes narrowed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just what I said. You don’t need another notch on your bedpost, Ty,” she said nastily but unable to help it. *Oh God, I sound catty.*

“Notch on my what? Don’t tell me you listen to rumors, Julia. You should know that half the stories floating in town are bullshit.” He scoffed.

“Oh? So Katie Heasting? Reggie Ross? Were they lying when they talked about how hot you are between the sheets?”

The dull flush on his cheeks answered for him. She slowly, deliberately walked away.

“Oh, come on, Julia. That was a while ago.”

“Three months is not a while.”

“You’re keeping track?”

She didn’t turn around to see the astonishment she could clearly hear in his voice. Time to find Jason and leave. And time to convince Meghan about the error of her ways.

Ty stared at the end of a fluffy black tail disappearing around a tree before him. Julia had to be one of the fastest silver foxes he'd ever raced. The minute they'd returned to the cabin, she'd excused herself to her room, where she'd loudly locked the door behind her.

Gabby retired as well, and Meghan left them to spend the night with Jason at their cabin a mile away.

Following Julia, Ty increased his speed, no longer caring if she heard him or not. Who the hell did she think she was to deny their connection? Even if his animal spirit hadn't demanded he finish this dance between them, he refused to ignore the pull of Julia Easton. Everything about her resonated on his level. He loved her seriousness, the subtle twinkle in her eye that told him when she liked something or not.

The dichotomy of her passion with her family and her stoic professionalism at work further intrigued a man who lived to solve puzzles. Julia was one large riddle he couldn't resist.

Racing after her, he jumped over tree roots, avoided a huge-ass owl after a field mouse and skirted several large rocks. The thrill of the chase added a dangerous element to his pursuit, as the animal in him began to seriously take over.

Running for nearly an hour, he lifted his head and followed her sweet scent. To his delight, he found a hint of musk that identified his little fox's intense arousal.

Mindless to everything but capturing and mounting his prize, he let his animal lead the way.

He found her panting in a darkened cave illuminated by the haze of moonlight passing through a natural skylight overhead. Bright yellow eyes glowed in the shadows. She growled as he neared, her ears back, her hackles raised. Yet her scent called to him on another level entirely. She made him hunger in a way he never had for any other female.

With a loud bark he jumped her, accepting the bites and scratch marks of a worthy adversary. Never had the prize been so sweet, and he fought for all he was worth as he gradually subdued the smaller but no less fierce vixen.

Unable to stop himself, and finally assured she'd capitulated, he waited for her to ready herself. She nudged him, lifted her tail, and teased that very hungry part of him. With a soft woof and a purr of victory, he let his desire and his animal spirit take charge.

While mating in animal form, they remained tied as he poured himself into her. He'd swear a solid *click* locked into place between him and the stubborn woman who made him complete. As one, they both shifted back to their human forms and then they fell asleep, exhausted from their trek through the forest.

Sometime later under the glow of moonlight, Ty roused and turned to Julia, not surprised to find her awake.

He stared down into bright brown eyes glinting in the dark.

"You okay?" he asked gruffly, embarrassed he'd lost himself to his silver fox.

She nodded but didn't speak. Her eyes searched his, the intensity in her gaze palpable.

"I've never done that before. I mean, the fox, he's never... Normally I'm in control." He was making a muck of it. To his relief, she nodded again.

"It's okay. I was, ah, kind of lost too."

Ty stroked her soft hair and watched the pleasure reflected in her smile. "You're so beautiful." He sighed and leaned down to kiss her, aware the ground had to be cold, rough and generally uncomfortable. Still, his dick hardened to the point of pain when he tasted the ripeness of her lips.

"Um, Ty?" She squirmed under him, bringing his hot shaft in better contact with her slick thighs.

Taking advantage, he grabbed his dick and pushed it between her legs, not penetrating, just caged by her limbs. Her hot moisture stirred him like nothing could.

He was beginning to understand Julia a lot better the more time he spent around her. The controlled front she presented at home was just that, a front. The reality of this precious vixen was that she had needs, wants and fears, like everyone else.

Personally, he'd never much liked her aunt and uncle. Too bent on outdoing everyone else in the clan, the older Eastons only cared about pedigree and clan standing. Funny that Julia and her sisters didn't reflect that one bit.

He leaned down and sucked on her earlobe, gratified when she hissed and arched into him, grazing his chest with hard nipples.

"Remember my conditions? Meet them and I'll help your sister with the council."

"Oh, yes." She moaned when he licked her ear and skimmed his lips over her soft throat toward her mouth.

He kissed her with a deep, driving need to possess.

She kissed him back with a dose of passion that drugged him with lust.

He nudged her thighs wider and angled his shaft so that his tip rested at the entrance of her sex. The warm wetness coated his slit, and he shook with the effort to hold back.

"Answer a few questions honestly and I'll do everything in my power to help Meghan, Gabby and you," he said thickly, wanting nothing more than to thrust home.

She shifted under him, and he slid farther inside her. She stopped and moaned his name. "You're doing something to me. Stop it."

"Stop what?" he whispered, and leaned down to take her nipple in his mouth. Though small, she was gently rounded. A perfect fit for Ty's mouth and hands. He sucked and inched deeper into her slick pussy. *Fuck me, my head's going to explode if I don't come inside her in the next two minutes.* Though he'd taken her as a fox, sex while human beat animalistic mating any day of the week.

"I want you so much." Julia grabbed his head and pulled him back to her lips with a vicious tug.

He lost his hold on his position and penetrated her while she took command of his mouth. With a low groan, he stilled inside her once fully seated and gave himself up to her touch. Warnings of commitment and her probable fertility paled against the desire riding him hard.

She licked and bit, teased with her tongue and stroked his with such skill he nearly came. Unable to help it, he rocked in and out of her. Light thrusts with his pelvis tilted to graze her plump clit while he rubbed his chest against her hard nipples.

“Yes, yes,” she hissed, and locked her ankles around his back. “Harder, Ty. More.”

“*Fuck.*” He grasped her ass in his palms and pushed into her, again and again. Pounding inside the delicate woman, he could no more stop himself than he could stop the flood of ecstasy rushing through him when she cried out and tightened around him.

He’d had sex before, but it had never been so complete. His body touched hers. His mind filled with thoughts of her and only her. But his animal spirit connected with hers in a way that astounded him. As if he’d finally found that part of him always missing, loving Julia was making him long for kits, for home and hearth. For forever.

An image of her round with his child intruded, and the spice of her need overwhelmed him.

“I’m coming,” he said on a breath as he exploded inside her. The orgasm left him lightheaded, awash in two very different sensations.

Pure pleasure: because sex with Julia was like dying and going to heaven.

Pure panic: because for the second time in his life, counting the first when he’d taken her in fox form, he hadn’t used protection. And despite the fact that foxes bred once a year, Julia was definitely in heat.

Julia could barely breathe. Sex with Ty had been both inevitable and incredible. At this point, what remained of her pitiful willpower could go to hell. He remained joined to her, his cock semi-hard and deliciously full.

Together, they smelled right. His scent covered hers yet didn’t overwhelm, rather, he smelled sweet, a combination of them both.

Running her hands over his strong arms, she kept her legs locked around his waist, not wanting him to pull out just yet.

“Hmm. You feel so good.” She kissed him again. He resisted for a moment, which surprised her. Then he groaned and deepened the kiss.

When he stopped, she was shocked he’d hardened again inside her.

“Ty?”

“I know. I just came and I’m hard again. I can’t help it. It’s you.” He groaned as if in pain, but didn’t withdraw. “Julia, I— When you look at me like that, it’s all I can do not to turn and take you hard. My fox wants to fuck you all over again,” he said in a husky voice.

“How am I looking at you?” she asked coyly, imagining herself on her knees, his cock in her mouth. She felt wicked and wild, and had no idea she could feel so free. Nothing seemed to matter right now but riding that pleasure train to climax all over again. “Move inside me.”

Ty’s eyes turned. “God, you’re making this hard.”

“I know.” She wiggled under him and grinned.

“Hell.” Ty grunted and began pistoning again. “Those questions, Julia?”

“Oh, you feel so good. Ask whatever you want, just don’t stop.” She shifted until he brushed her clit as he took her.

She hadn’t thought they’d fit. She was tiny, he...wasn’t. But he filled her right up.

Instinct demanded he spend inside her again. Her animal spirit whispered her longings, her needs and desires. “Take me, Ty, and I’ll give you whatever you want.”

“Julia,” he breathed and stared at her while he fucked her. Brutal, beautiful, wild. Her silver fox reveled in Ty’s conquest. He’d run her down, the only silver fox ever to do so. And he’d beaten her challenge without hurting her. She could see scratches and bite marks all over his arms and chest. They’d fade over time, but right now they marked him as hers.

“Come inside me,” she encouraged.

“Fuck yes,” he groaned. He inserted a hand between them and rubbed her clit, gliding over the slick nub with enough pressure to set her off again.

“Ty, please.” Julia begged him to end the painful hunger setting her on fire.

“Take it, Julia. All for you,” he growled and pinched her clit.

She screamed and came around him. He removed his hand and thrust fast and deep inside her before reaching the pinnacle of release again.

Ty shuddered, climaxing. When he pulled out, he milked the rest of his come over her belly and rubbed it in. “Yeah, that’s it. I want it all over you. So everyone knows where you belong,” he rasped.

His warm hands soothed her, and she basked in the waves of her climax until the cold air dragged her from her sex-induced stupor.

“That was incredible.”

“And something that’s going to be happening a lot in the near and far future,” Ty murmured with contentment. “You’re finally mine.”

“Yours,” she repeated softly, thinking how wonderful that sounded. Fox to fox, woman to man... “Holy crap!”

“And there you are. I was wondering where the real Julia had gone.” Ty chuckled.

She glanced at him and saw his canines flash sharp and white in the dark. “I, ah, that is, I didn’t mean to—”

“To wave that pretty tail at me? To get me so worked up I couldn’t think past the need to fuck that sweet pussy?” His crude words aroused her, and he seemed to know it. “So many secrets. Prim and proper Julia likes it rough, and she likes it dirty. If you hadn’t already wrung me dry, I’d do you all over again.”

Her face felt hot enough to melt the sun. “Ty.”

“It’s true. And I came hard inside you, baby. Too late to stop that now, but next time we’ll use protection. Maybe.”

She couldn’t miss the odd look on his face, nor could she mistake his intention when he rubbed her belly.

“Wh— I didn’t— I can’t—” She couldn’t breathe. What if she had kits? What if her babes came out...different? *Oh my God. What a mess.*

“Julia?” Ty frowned and withdrew. “It’ll be all right. No matter what, I’ll take care of you.”

She started hyperventilating, and he shushed her and rocked her in his arms.

“I know neither of us planned this, but you have to admit it’s been building for a while. How about we let this relationship run its course? You and me, what’s not to like? Even your aunt can’t say I’m not good enough for you.”

“True,” she agreed, still blindsided from her stupidity. How could she have let him come inside her?

“We could get married to seal the deal,” he teased. “Want to hang around until Saturday and let Ned walk you down the aisle to me?” The sudden passion in his bright eyes blinded her. “Honey, what’s wrong?”

“I can’t marry you.” Her sisters would be disowned and cast out. Ty would hate her as soon as he learned what she really was. The good girl she’d strived to be her whole life would no longer matter once she lost what meant so much to her. Acceptance, a place in society. Her home. Ty’s love.

He paused and glanced away. “I was just teasing, Julia. Relax.”

Her face flamed. Of course Ty wasn’t asking her to marry him. The most eligible bachelor in town didn’t want Julia. Though an Easton, she was little more than an orphaned fox with little standing in the community.

“Question number one, why wouldn’t you marry me, if I was asking, that is?”

“Are you kidding me? You want to play twenty questions *now*?” She couldn’t believe she’d acted so uninhibited with him. *God, I actually begged him to come in me. I am seriously losing it.* Because thoughts of having Ty’s baby pleased the hell out of her.

“You want me to smooth things over with the council, answer my questions. *Honestly.* I can smell a lie.”

Foxes couldn’t do that, could they? She never had been able to smell with that degree of precision, but Ty was the sheriff. Perhaps his sense of smell accounted for what she’d always attributed to a cunning mind.

“But, Ty—”

“If I have to ask again, I’m going to go back and tell the council Meghan not only left Cougar Falls for a man, but that his family is a bunch of hunters who kill for sport.”

“That’s a lie.”

“It’s true. They hunt for sport. They’re just not Hunters.”

She fumed. “Blackmail?” Before he could open his mouth to retort, she stopped him. “Fine. I wouldn’t marry you because I don’t—” Love you? That would be a lie. She loved him. And that was a big part of the problem.

“You don’t what?”

“I don’t want to get hurt.” There. That was the truth.

He frowned. “I’d never harm you, Julia. I admit, I was a bit rough before, but I’m the one carrying bite marks.” He glanced down at his arms, looking pleased.

“Not physically harmed. Emotionally. You have a lot of girlfriends. I couldn’t marry a man who wouldn’t be loyal.”

“*Had* a lot of girlfriends, and there weren’t actually that many. Does it bother you I dated women who weren’t fox?”

“Not at all. I think the clan’s too narrow-minded for their own good.” The one thing she’d always respected about Ty, he didn’t seem to care for outward trappings. Though the women he’d dated were pretty, each had substance. To Julia’s annoyance, she actually liked the women he’d been linked with, silver fox and otherwise. “I think we should be able to date whoever we want, provided they’re Ac-taw.” Visions of her mother dying outside of town never quite left her thoughts, and worry for Meghan returned full force.

“If I was mated, there would never be another for me, or for my wife,” he added in a hard voice.

She thrilled at the possession in his tone and had to push past silly dreams of forever with Ty. “On that I’d agree.”

“Good.”

“Fine. But you’re not looking for a mate, right?”

He didn’t say anything, and his silence bothered her. Granted, she wasn’t offering, but plenty of men in town had thought her pretty enough to at least want to date. Apparently to Ty she was nothing more than an easy lay.

She frowned. “I’m not looking for a man.”

“Too bad you found one.”

Chapter Six

Ty entered the house after Julia, slipping through her opened window into her bedroom. They fell into bed together and slept the minute their heads hit the pillows.

Movement wakened him and he blinked up into the sun peering through the open window. Julia didn't spare him a glance as she got up, pulled on her robe and headed to the bathroom.

He heard the shower start and sighed. Not that he wanted to talk, but he and Julia had a lot left needing to be said. He shoved his legs through his jeans and buttoned up seconds before Gabby burst through the door.

She stopped upon seeing him and her nostrils flared.

"Well it's about time."

When she continued to stand there staring at him, he sank back onto the bed. He'd had a long night. Having sex with Julia hadn't sated him, though it should have. His animal spirit yapped at him to stop dicking around. He'd had Julia, naked, in bed, all night long, and he'd only come inside her while in the forest—once as a fox and twice as a man.

But he needed to slow down.

The idea he might have already impregnated her freaked him the hell out. On the one hand, he wasn't ready for kits and family. Single-guy living suited him just fine. On the other hand, he'd made love to *Julia*. The only woman who'd ever wormed her way under his skin—and dammit, into his heart—didn't want to mate with him.

He should have been happier about her not wanting any ties. Instead, her independence insulted him. She belonged to him. He could feel it, much as he almost wished he couldn't. She'd been so tight around him, so new. Not a virgin, but not an experienced woman by any means. He'd never heard of her dating anyone in town, and his curiosity about her past consumed him.

"I'm so happy for you two. I've been waiting years for this." Gabby stunned the hell out of Ty by jumping on top of him, knocking him flat on the bed. "She's always had a thing for you, you know. Not that she would ever admit it."

Ty stared at Gabby in fascination. Julia had a thing for him? "What are you talking about?"

"Come on, Ty. When's the last time you saw Julia drinking at a party?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Gabby grinned. He'd never seen her so cheery before. It gave her already cute features a beauty all their own. Her golden skin flushed with pleasure as she rolled off him and sat next to him on the bed. "She's so serious all the time. I didn't even know what she'd done until she confessed it while drunk at the last celebration. You dropped her off and I found her slurring her sorrows a few minutes later."

"Yeah? What'd she say?" He needed to know. Never had anything been more important than hearing Julia might have a thing for him.

Gabby tilted her head. "I don't know how much I should tell you. I don't think it's wise for you alpha types to always have the upper hand."

Ty smiled wide. "Gabby, honey, do I look alpha to you?"

"Yes."

The woman wasn't buying the dimple. "Come on. I've wanted her for years. Fool woman never even noticed me. Still wouldn't have if I hadn't hightailed it out here to help her."

"Yes, why did you?"

Ty paused, not sure he wanted to admit any more to Julia's sister. Then again, Gabby seemed in the mood to reveal her sister's deep, dark secrets. If he played this right, he could find the information he needed.

"Sarah Duncan told me Julia might be dealing with Hunters."

"Oh, man. No wonder you followed."

"I couldn't bear the thought of Julia in danger." Truth.

Gabby softened. "So you rushed out here to save her. That is so sweet. No one ever saves Julia."

"That's because the stubborn woman is too busy always trying to save herself and others."

"Julia's had to be independent most of her life. It's not like she could count on Uncle Harry or Aunt Lynn for help."

"I get that." He could. He'd never liked the social climbers.

"To be honest, Julia refuses to ask for help because of my mother."

"Oh hell, was she as bad as Harry and Lynn?"

"She wasn't cruel, no. But she was self-involved. A lot of drama in the Easton household," Gabby said with a bitter twist to her lips. "She and my father were not on good terms."

"I'm sorry. I know he died a little after Meghan was born."

Gabby raised her brows. "You know what? I don't care anymore."

"Huh?"

"I need you to promise me something."

Every instinct in his body warned him to pay very careful attention to Gabby. "What?"

"Promise me that no matter what, Julia and Meghan will always have a place in Cougar Falls."

Ty didn't like that Gabby didn't include herself in that promise. "And you?"

"I can fend for myself. Meghan's stubborn, but she'll want to keep ties to the family even after she marries Jason. And she will marry him. Julia's too dense to see it, but Meghan really loves him."

"Shit."

"Yep. Julia needs Cougar Falls, Ty. She always has to have a home there. And I want you to promise she'll be okay."

"Gabby, just tell me what you're hinting at and stop dancing around it," he growled.

"Sorry, Sheriff. I know you're used to being in charge, but this is too important for rules and regulations. I need your promise. Consider it blind faith in my sister."

"I won't let anyone harm Julia, ever." And he meant that with every breath in his body.

He must have sounded convincing, because Gabby sighed with relief. "Good. Fact is, our dad didn't die right after Meghan's birth. The fox everyone thinks fathered us never existed. My real dad and mom married in secret. He was never good enough for the family. Aunt Lynn hated him, and Uncle Harry made his life miserable whenever Dad would see Mom. Eventually he stopped coming around."

Ty blinked in astonishment. Of all the things Gabby might have told him, he hadn't expected this. "A secret mating? How did they keep that quiet?"

"According to Julia, they would meet outside of town. That way no one could track Dad by scent."

"That's crazy, not to mention dangerous." Anger on Julia's behalf struck him. "If something had happened to your mother, with your dad outcast, who would have been left to raise you three? Lynn and Harry," he answered with disgust. Then what she'd said made a sick kind of sense. "Hell. Is that why your mother died? She'd gone to meet your father?"

Gabby nodded, her eyes sad. "Julia refuses to talk about it, but I once heard Aunt Lynn talking to Uncle Harry. After Dad left, Mom was really depressed. It was hard on all of us, but especially on Julia. Dad loved her a lot, and Mom needed someone to talk to about her misery."

"So she shared her concerns with her what, ten-year-old daughter?"

"Yep. Good old Mom cried herself to sleep after every one of Dad's visits. Mom wouldn't move from Cougar Falls. I like to think she wouldn't leave us, but who knows? Dad got sick of having to hide all the time and just left. Mom followed him and..."

"That explains a lot." Like why Julia had such an aversion to dating. Why she had looked horrified at thoughts of mating. Relieved it wasn't because of him, he had a sudden urge to shake her, to tell her that not everyone was like her parents.

"Gabby, tell me something. Why didn't your father just claim your mother in public? Why did he agree to so much secrecy?"

"Because Dad wasn't a silver fox."

"What?"

"And he wasn't an outsider."

Ty didn't understand. "Then what was he?"

"Cat."

"But, that... Clans intermarry, it happens. But they don't breed."

"Normally, I'd agree with you. But Julia, Meghan and I are proof they sometimes do."

Ty whistled, shocked and somehow not surprised. "If word got out you three were part cat, some in the clan might strike to have you removed. Wouldn't want to taint our pure lines, now would we?" he asked with sarcasm.

"Tainted lines, hmm?" Trust Julia to return to the room and interpret his words in the worst possible way. She stared in shocked dismay from him to Gabby.

Gabby shook her head. "Oh, Julia. It's not what you think. Ty wasn't saying—"

"He's just like the others. I told you that. But you just had to push it. You and your silly notions that love conquers all. You know better, Gabby." Julia whipped her gaze to his and tilted her chin at a stubborn angle.

The heartbreak in her soulful eyes tore at him. "Julia, you don't understand. I wasn't—"

"I *knew* you'd react this way. The high-and-mighty sheriff who enforces all the rules."

"Now hold on—"

"And you," she said to Gabby, who now looked shamefaced. "You just had to tell him. Now you've compromised not just yourself, but Meghan too. Where's she going to go when she realizes her infatuation with Jason won't last?"

"Julia, Ty won't tell anyone."

"It doesn't matter. We're going home. Or at least, we're going to the place we *used* to call home." She stormed out of the room, but not before Ty saw a tear slide down her cheek.

In the state she appeared, nothing Ty said would get through to her. Tension, fury and fear radiated in her brown eyes, a storm brewing and ready to rain all over their tentative relationship. But it was her hurt that knotted him from the inside out.

"Gabby, go help her. Fuck," he swore and left the room, wishing Gabby had never opened her mouth. How the hell was he supposed to work around this huge revelation?

Earlier, when he'd teased Julia about marrying him, he'd wanted to see her reaction. He'd been hoping for a surprised yes, not a horrified no. Burying the ache when she'd rejected him, he'd pretended not to care. But the fox inside him demanded he strengthen his ties to the vixen.

Ty had an uneasy feeling he'd scent-marked her as more than just his latest girlfriend, but as something much more permanent. She had a right to her worry. Though his parents weren't purists by any means, he knew they expected him to mate with a silver fox. As town sheriff, his position relied on his ability to keep the peace, as well as the respect afforded him by the Ac-taw he protected. A fierce fighter and strong Shifter, he'd never before had a problem with support. Would he now?

Thoroughly disgusted with himself for even thinking of distancing himself from Julia's plight, he reminded himself that the woman he still burned for was Julia. Bear, fox, raptor or cat, she commanded his affections because of *who* not *what* she was.

He'd have a hard enough time convincing her to put aside her prejudices and take a chance on him. In the meantime, he'd have to work his way around the clan council.

Well, he did love a challenge. Time to put his intelligence to the test. So thinking, he made a phone call to Gerald. If anyone could weasel Julia out of possible trouble, it was his friend, Mr. Lawyer extraordinaire.

After an eye-opening conversation and a shower, Ty changed into the clothes he'd brought with him and sat at the kitchen table across from Gabby, hoping someone in this cabin could cook. Julia glared at him from her position at the stove but didn't speak. Gabby refused to meet his gaze, chastised and looking depressed. Gabby didn't wear a frown well. The expression didn't fit with her sunny disposition.

Julia looked tense and angry. He didn't like it.

"Question number two, Julia."

She flinched but didn't turn around to face him. She slammed a skillet on the stove and tossed some strips of bacon down. His stomach rumbled loud enough for everyone to hear.

Gabby smothered a smile.

One down, one to go.

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard you," she growled at him. *Growled.*

Not cool, not aloof. She sounded mad. Her passion he could handle, but not her wounded, distanced behavior. The way she'd treated him this past month had driven him insane.

"Question number two, and this has several parts. When was the last time you saw your father?"

"As a cat or a man?" she asked nastily.

"Either. I'm not picky."

She stabbed into the bacon with a fork and muttered under her breath. Grease spattered, the heavenly sound of frying pork mingling with a woman's anger. "I saw him the day before he left us all for good."

"Do you miss him?"

"That's none of your business."

"Meghan and Jason," he reminded her in a sing-song voice.

He winked at Gabby and waited for Julia to yell at him.

To his relief, she did. "You mangy, arrogant, flea-ridden cur. Who the hell do you think you are threatening my family?"

"Ah, Julia? You're burning the bacon."

"Fuck the bacon, and fuck you too!"

Gabby and he stared at Julia, shocked. He didn't think he'd ever heard her say the F-word aloud before. "Nice language. Now, about the bacon?"

She whirled around and snatched the strips from the pan, putting them on a plate Gabby hurriedly retrieved and brought to the table. When Julia turned to confront him, he asked for coffee.

Her eyes turned molten gold, and he wanted her all over again. More, he wanted to soothe the hurt he could feel in her soul. "If you think for one minute I'm going to wait on you hand and foot while you order me around, you can go straight to—"

"Julia! If you wouldn't mind, I'd like a cup too." Gabby shrugged and gave her sister a pretty smile.

When Julia grumbled and turned around again, he and Gabby shared a conspiratorial smile. Keeping Julia off balance put her mind off her worries and on him. Anger he could deal with.

"I'm still waiting," Ty said again.

"Yes, I miss him. He was actually very nice, unlike my mother, who lived in a constant state of depression."

He wanted to see her face, but he didn't want her to stop talking.

Bitterly, she continued. "He loved her, for all the good it did him. Her family wouldn't let him stay with us, and Dad didn't want Mom to suffer because of the clan council. They were even worse back then than they are now."

"So Dad just left," Gabby said.

"Yeah, one day he just left. He never came back. Then Mom left. She never came back either." Silence weighed heavily on the room. "Happy now?"

He didn't want to think about her tough childhood, but he needed to know. "Is that why you don't want to mate? Because you're afraid what happened to your mother will happen to you?"

Julia turned and watched him with a frown. "I'm not my mother. I want to mate. One day I'd like to have a child. But I'm afraid..."

"She's afraid her child might be like me," Gabby answered in a soft voice.

"That's not true," Julia denied.

"What does that mean?" Ty asked. Gabby seemed fine to him.

"That is true. Otherwise you and Ty would admit to the bond between you right now."

Ty choked on the piece of bacon he'd been eating. Oh hell. Was that why he couldn't think of anything besides Julia lately? Had he truly mated her, even accidentally?

Julia glared at her sister. "We had sex. So what?"

Obviously the vixen was worried. She'd mentioned sex in front of her sister.

Gabby shook her head. "If it was just sex, then why do you still smell like him? And he smells like you. Even under all that bacon, I can scent your bond."

Ty should have been more worried about the thought of mating, but oddly enough, he wasn't. A part of him had recognized Julia from the very beginning. He didn't want to acknowledge the truth, but he couldn't help himself. His animal spirit longed for her. He only wished she liked him half as much. Waiting for her to deny their connection, he watched her every expression.

Except Julia didn't refute her sister. The emotions crossing her face didn't look like out-and-out rejection. Worry, fear and longing flashed in her eyes before she shuttered her emotions and glanced away.

"Ty and I aren't mated. You don't want a wife, remember?" she said to him.

He hadn't thought he'd wanted a wife, but an existence without Julia didn't bear thinking about.

"Ty? God, we're talking about my life here. Could you please pay attention?" she snapped.

"What was the question?" He liked triggering her temper. An angry Julia cared, and she turned him on like nothing could.

She threw a spatula at him he easily dodged. "I asked if you wanted a wife!"

"A wife?"

"To mate."

"Why yes, I think we should. Thank you, Julia. I accept. Gabby, witness?"

"Witness," Gabby repeated with a large grin.

"Tell me again, Ned." Ned Williams Senior did his best to control his excitement. His son couldn't possibly have seen what he'd thought. He sat with his boys and his brother, Gil, away from the house around a campfire. The distance was enough to soothe his need for space. He understood why Gil moved out whenever Tilda had guests. Christ, he couldn't wait until her family left. The damn reunion was giving him an ulcer.

Ned Junior answered in a gruff voice, trying to convince him of what should have been the impossible. "I'm telling you, Dad, her eyes weren't right. The pupils grew all weird, like a cat's. And I'd swear her nose started to grow, like a snout on a dog or something."

"Or a fox," Bob said. "Seen a lot of foxes around here lately. Right, Dave?"

Dave agreed. "Yeah, and we normally don't see many of them this early in the spring. Think we should tell Mama?"

Ned Sr. smacked Dave on the back of the head, hard enough to hurt.

"Shit."

"*Tell Mama*. Idiot. Tell her what, Dave? That your oldest brother is so lovesick over that piece of ass he'll make up any story to get her back? That her eyes went all animal-like? What a load of crap. Julia Easton told him no. And big, bad Junior was scared by a fucking girl." Ned Sr. sneered.

Junior flushed, looking sorry he'd mentioned anything. Exactly what Ned Sr. wanted.

“Forget it. I don’t know what the hell I saw. But I don’t like that asshole Roderick. Why was he sniffing around you, Dad? You making friends with out-of-towners, now?”

Ned Sr. shrugged. “He might be a dick, but he knows who to root for when the game is on.” He went on the attack and changed the subject. “Not like you pussies, too busy hanging on to your momma’s tit, like those dickhead brothers of hers. Hell, you’re good for nothing but the garage and the mill. Why don’t you go back inside and bother your *real* family, ’cause it sure the hell ain’t me.”

He turned his back on them, waiting for his sons to leave. The younger two grumbled but left quickly.

Junior stayed behind. “You know something you ain’t saying.”

“Get on, boy. Your uncle Gil and I got things to talk about. *Manly* things.” He insulted Junior where it hurt most, pleased when his son turned red-faced and glared down at him. Still, Junior knew better than to confront the man of the house.

He turned on his heel and stomped away from the small campfire, back into the house.

Gil stirred. His brother didn’t say much, but when he did, Ned Sr. listened.

“She’s one of them Shifters. I sensed it earlier, felt it in the younger girl too, Jason’s gal. Cute, but abnormal. What do you want to do about it?”

“You know.” Hell, Ned Sr. hadn’t been on a Hunting trip since one of those god-awful Shifters had killed his daddy before he could skin it alive. Those fucking predatory skinwalkers. Demons on four legs. “Time to go Huntin’.”

Gil nodded. “Thought you’d say that. I’ll do some scouting. Make sure your boys keep quiet. Tilda won’t like it if she thinks we’re Hunting again.”

“I know.” Ned Sr. loved the woman, but she had the damndest ideas. Ever since Jason had been born, things just hadn’t set right between them. Tilda belonged to him. Normally, she shut her mouth, made his supper and kept the house the way he liked it. And she still did whatever he wanted in bed whenever he wanted it. The perfect woman, except when she’d get those odd notions in her head, notions her fucking father had put there too many years back.

An animal lover, of all things. And her brothers were just like her. He couldn’t wait ’til the lot of them left.

Gil pulled a long blade from his boot. It glittered in the firelight. “Suppose it’s in all of them, then.”

It took Ned Sr. a moment before he understood. “Yep. Julia, Gabby and Meghan, I expect. Once it’s in the blood, well, there’s no working around that. Not that we have to kill them right away. Maybe some sport to be had first.” Some bed sport. Ned Sr. understood why his sons lusted after those Easton women. Beautiful and wild. He bet they’d fuck like animals.

Gil drawled, “We could make do with some fun first. Wouldn’t mind that a bit. We’ll need more than knives then. Guns too, a few rifles, some good strong rope.” Gil smiled. “You know, I just might break out my bow again.”

“Good thinking, brother.” Ned Sr. nodded. “We’ll take the time to plan, then use the youngest to bait the rest. I have an idea that just might work.” He paused. “One thing bothers me though. That Roderick. He’ll have friends. Might need some backup on this one.”

Gil seemed to consider the idea. “Want me to call in the fellas?”

“I think so. Never hurts to be careful.”

Gil ran his knife along his thumb and droplets of blood welled where he’d cut it. “You got that right.”

Chapter Seven

“Julia!”

It just figured Gerald would be the first person they’d run into when they hit town. Ty’s friend wore jeans and a pullover sweater, with that natural windblown look all the women in town seemed to favor. Personally, Ty didn’t see anything remarkable about Gerald except his ability to get under Ty’s skin.

Julia left the truck and Ty set it in park. Finding new tires for the vehicle had been a hassle, but fortunately a friendly mechanic in Kettle Falls had helped him out. With Meghan and Jason now in Whitefish and Gabby driving to her house ahead of them, Ty had hoped to spend more alone time with Julia before the rest of the world intruded. Apparently, seeking privacy in his own home had been a dumb thing to do.

Gerald gave her a big hug and froze. He took a careful step back and glanced from her to Ty with a shit-eating grin on his face.

Ty sighed. “Hell.”

“Well it’s about time! So you finally did it. I told you she wouldn’t say no.”

Julia didn’t look so happy to see him anymore.

“Actually, she asked me,” Ty added with a sly grin.

Julia groaned. “Ty...”

“Really?” Gerald asked. Ty could picture his whiskers twitching with curiosity.

Ty shook his head. “Long story. Gerald, what are you doing here?”

“Ah, we had some problems while you were gone. One of the raptors spotted you driving home and gave me a call.”

“I was gone for a few days. What the hell couldn’t my deputies have handled?”

Gerald exhaled loudly. Not good. “That’s just it. John tried to handle an altercation with the wolves that didn’t go so well. Not after you threw a bunch of them in jail before you left. Anyway, somehow Sophie got involved—”

“What the hell does she have to do with this? She’s the only wolf I know who *doesn’t* cause trouble.”

“The thing is, a few bears were horsing around in the grocery store. So Sophie intervened. She suffered a broken arm—”

“*What?*”

“The bears didn’t mean it. And then Monty got involved. Next thing you know there’s blood and fur all over the place. John showed up to ease tensions and Monty attacked him.”

“I’m sure Monty only attacked him because he smelled another bear and sensed a threat,” Julia offered.

Ty glared at her. “Don’t help him.” He turned back to Gerald. “Is everyone okay?”

“John’s pretty beat up but he’s healing at County. Sophie’s arm’s in a cast. Monty’s locked up and going nuts.”

Julia frowned. “He doesn’t like to be caged. You need to set him free.”

“How the hell do you know what he likes?” Ty didn’t like her familiarity with the gray wolf. Monty Grayclaw turned peace into problems whenever he opened his mouth. Time to talk to Burke—*again*—about the newest member of his pride. Maybe this time he’d cite Monty. Some community service might do the gray wolf some good.

Gerald smirked. “You’re looking mighty green there, Ty.”

“Asshole.”

Julia huffed. “Nice language, Sheriff.”

“Really. And around a lady.” Gerald had to add his two cents.

“My foxy lady. *Mine*. Now how long has he been locked up?” Ty asked through gritted teeth, wishing for once someone else had been elected town sheriff.

“A day.”

“Great.” Ty ran a hand through his hair. He had to settle things down. But he also wanted to tend to Julia. If he left her alone, she’d take off, putting more distance between them they didn’t need. “Hold on a minute, Julia.” He pulled his friend aside. “I need to go into town. Don’t let her leave.”

“You know I can hear you, right?” Julia asked with feigned politeness.

Ty ignored her. “We have a lot to talk about. See if you can get her to open up to you. For some reason I’ve never been able to figure out, she likes you.”

“Sure thing.” Gerald glanced at Julia and sighed. “You always were a lucky bastard, Ty.”

“Yeah, I am. You lay one paw on her, I’ll gut you, best friend or not.”

“I’m wounded.”

Ty didn’t find him amusing, even less so when Gerald didn’t bother to hold back a grin.

“Sure thing, Ty. Me and Mrs. Sheriff will while away the hours talking about your finer points. Feel free to pick up some food before you come back. I ate your last bit of ham, and, uh, the rest of the stuff in your fridge too.”

Julia snickered.

Ty’s heart softened hearing his mate laugh. He gave her a solid kiss on the mouth, scowled at Gerald, then drove to the station.

He found Monty pacing like a demon in a cell all his own between two drunken bears on one side and four beaten-up raptors on the other. Another group of wolves occupied the fourth cell. Wolves in jail—no surprise there. His deputies quickly explained what had occurred in his absence. Laura, a grizzly and the senior officer, vowed to have a talk with Gerald Winters and his big mouth. They'd had everything handled, or so she said.

The groups behind bars ranted about the department the minute they saw Ty.

"Save it," he barked and pulled Monty out. The gray wolf snarled but didn't attack. Once out of sight of the cell, he visibly shook as Ty led him to his office. "What the hell happened to you?"

A long time ago, Ty had been close to Monty. The gray wolf had a decent sense of humor, a hard head that had suffered many a blow during childhood stunts, and a savvy poker face. He'd disappeared years ago, leaving his friends and family behind with more questions than answers.

Since he'd been back, he'd been in one scrape after another. After joining the Catamount Pride, Monty had seemed to be trying to clean up his act. *Seemed* being the key word.

"You have shitty timing, Monty," Ty muttered, concerned about Monty's condition. "Damn, son, you look like crap."

Monty bared his teeth in a semblance of a grin and sat. "Thanks."

Ty dug into his desk drawer and found a Snickers. He tossed it to Monty and watched the wolf gobble it down. He handed him a glass of water and watched it disappear as well. "They didn't feed you?" Anger surged, but before he could yell for Laura, Monty stopped him.

"I didn't eat what they brought. I'm a vegetarian now."

Ty's jaw dropped.

Monty grinned. "Kidding. I just hate being caged. Had some problems with confinement during my lost years. Don't worry, I'm feeling much better." With a steady hand, he brushed back black hair threaded with silver.

"Okay, wolf. Tell me the whole of it."

Monty grimaced. "I followed a few wolves talking about taking vengeance on the town sheriff. They had plans for you, Ty. None of it sounded good. Well, I followed them into the grocery store, only to find two bears messing with Sophie. So yeah, I got distracted."

Of course he did. Ty had seen the way Monty watched Sophie. A pretty little wolf and new to the town, she'd been quite the curiosity for a while. Not aggressive like the wolves of her Order, Sophie worked hard and didn't give anyone trouble. He had a feeling Monty was soft on the woman, especially after hearing about the damage the wolf had done on her behalf.

Monty continued. "Those bears aren't cubs anymore. Assholes are huge and old enough to know better. They were tossing her between them like a fucking rag doll. One of them threw her so hard she hit a rack and it fell on her, breaking her arm. I saw red and attacked."

Ty sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. So much for the bears and wolves getting along. Stovall, the bears' leader, would blow a gasket. Normally, the giant of a man with a heart of gold would try to reason out their difficulties. But a wolf attack days after someone had bludgeoned his truck... Shit. "Does Stovall know?"

"How the hell should I know? I've been cooped up in here while your damned deputies have been playing house," Monty said in a louder voice.

Low growls from outside the office answered him.

"You're just making friends all over the place, aren't you? I take it you attacked John because you smelled bear?"

The wolf flushed. "Ah, yeah. I'm really sorry about that. I went into protective overdrive with Sophie. Laura at least let me know Sophie's okay."

"But the oaf wouldn't see her when she came to visit," Laura yelled from the other room.

So much for the privacy of his office. Ty rubbed his eyes tiredly, really wishing he'd spent his first evening at home sequestered with Julia and not his job.

"But enough about me. What's that pretty scent all over you?" The interest on the wolf's face alarmed him. Monty had a way with women. Ty thought of him as Gerald in wolf form, but not as smooth. The wildness around Monty's eyes clearly reflected the animal inside.

"Never you mind."

His old friend frowned. "It's more than just her scent. Yours is mingled with it. Damn. Never thought I'd see the day. Who's the lucky fox?"

"Julia Easton." Ty didn't look away from Monty, sending a signal the only way he knew how without bashing Monty's brains in. "She's *mine*."

Monty finally glanced away, acknowledging Ty's claim. "Congrats. Sucker." He snickered and groaned, fingering his jaw. "By the way, tell Laura to watch that right hook. She put a bit too much bear behind that punch."

"I heard that," Laura yelled.

"Damn woman hears everything," Ty murmured. "Okay, Monty. I'm letting you go. Make things right with John. He won't hold a grudge. And go see Sophie if it'll make her feel better."

"I will. I'm really sorry about this. But I'm telling you right now, I see those bears harassing her again, I won't stop with broken bones. I'll kill the bastards."

"Perfect. Now take your testosterone somewhere else. I'll deal with the bears. Oh, and a word of advice? Take a shower before you go see Sophie. You stink."

“Dick. Later, Sheriff.” Monty flipped him off and left the office.

Ty worked some damage control with the bears and wolves, made a call to Burke to let him know the rowdiest member of his small pride would be returning shortly and to keep a leash, and preferably a muzzle, on the gray wolf. Then he signed a few things needing his attention and headed home.

On the short drive back to his place, he thought about the cats and wondered. Burke didn’t much care who joined his pride so long as the Shifter would give his or her loyalty. If things didn’t work out with the foxes, he and Julia could always move there. It would hurt to leave his family and the friends he’d made throughout his life, but he’d still see them every day. He just wouldn’t have that tight connection he’d always had.

He couldn’t imagine leaving Julia to fend for herself if push came to shove. To make a choice between his clan and his mate proved easy. Julia was his future. One he needed to return to before Gerald scared her away for good.

“I’m so glad you’re back. You worried me,” Gerald said, a lecture in his tone.

Julia groaned. “Go ahead, get it off your chest.”

She’d worked for Gerald for five years and knew the silver fox better than he knew himself. His glib tongue and roving eye masked a serious, responsible Shifter who wanted to settle down and support the community. Problem was, no woman could keep Gerald’s interest for longer than a few weeks at most. Julia had lost count of how many flowers she’d ordered for him. *The Date Breaker Bouquet*, for the lady who ails you.

Gerald frowned at her. “I wish you would have told me about your problems with Meghan.”

“Ty told you?”

“Yeah. He told me about everything. About Meghan, about your dad.”

Tears welled though she tried to blink them away. “I trusted him.”

“And he trusts me. If there’s a legal loophole in this town, I know about it. If there’s anything I can dig out of the council members, I’ll find it. Come on, Julia. We’re friends. You know I’d never betray you. And you have to know Ty won’t either.”

Rationally, she agreed with him. But it chafed her Ty hadn’t thought to ask her permission before sharing family secrets.

“So did you really propose to Ty?”

She leaned her head back on the couch and counted to ten. “No. I did not propose to Ty. The fox accepted an offer I never made, and somehow I’m wearing his scent.”

“Somehow?” Gerald murmured.

She blushed and snapped back, “I know how it happened. I just mean I hadn’t thought it would be anything more than, uh, something physical.”

“Bullshit.”

She blinked at Gerald and sat up straight. “What?”

“Honey, I’ve watched you two dance around each other for years. Whenever he’d come into the office, you avoided his gaze. But you’d watch him all the same. Not like anyone else who ever approached you. You gave them all the cold shoulder. Ty was different.”

“Come on, Gerald.”

“You know it’s true. You care for him, don’t you?”

“I guess.”

He scoffed. “You’d better get a little closer than *I guess*. That man will rip my head off for looking at you the wrong way, and Ty’s as close as a brother to me. Your problems are now his. And he’ll do everything he can to see that you’re happy.” He paused. “You’re happy at the office, right? You are going to come back to work with me eventually, aren’t you?”

She grinned. “Yes, Gerald. I like my job. I’m not so sure about my future in town, though. My sisters and I have kept our parentage secret for a long time, but I’m not sure how much longer we can hide from the truth.” She looked into Gerald’s light brown eyes, seeing the friend who’d been there to encourage her through years of loneliness and hard times with her aunt and uncle.

Next to Sarah and her sisters, Gerald really was her best friend.

“What’s that look?”

“You know me better than my new mate does.” She sighed. “This relationship is doomed, isn’t it? My problems are Ty’s now. He could lose his job, lose his place in town and be kicked out.” Real worry made her tremble.

Gerald frowned. “And Ty said Meghan was the drama queen. Julia, this isn’t the end of the world. So your dad was a cat. You could always settle in with the Catamount Pride. Burke’s a pain in the ass, but I consider him a good friend.” He winked at her. “And his mate’s beyond lovely. Dean and Grady might give you fits, but they all take care of each other.”

Dean and Grady, Burke’s brothers, lived to plague him with practical jokes. She’d even participated a time or two.

Gerald continued. “The pride’s an option. You know they already have two bears and a wolf living with them. But you also need to consider the simpler option—staying with the silver foxes. You don’t realize it, but your aunt and uncle are in the minority on the council. Most of us don’t care so much about social standing and breeding lines. We just want good families and strong, healthy and happy kits.”

“That’s all I want.” She bit her lip, needing to confide in someone. What Gabby had said earlier had merit, even if Julia hadn’t wanted to admit it. “But, Gerald, what if my kits aren’t kits, but cats?”

He frowned. "What?"

"My mom was fox, my dad a cat. I have both of them in me, though I've only ever turned fox. But Gabby, she can be either."

His eyes widened. "Are you kidding me?"

"No, I'm not. Aunt Lynn told me what kind of a hell we'd be living in if that came to light. They'd kick us out for sure." Hell, she'd been raised on the mantra that different equaled bad. Assimilate, be good, blend in. Was it any wonder she liked the law? A place where rules were clearly defined appealed to her need for structure and fairness.

Gerald closed his mouth around a swear. "Your aunt is a real piece of work. Julia, the ability to take multiple forms is a blessing, not a curse. Only a purist like Lynn Easton would consider Gabby anything less than a miracle."

"But you know she's not the only one. Say what you want about youth in the clan, but the silver foxes are led by the oldest and most powerful. They all measure standing by hereditary lines, not shifting abilities."

He exhaled on a loud breath. "Maybe so, but the fact remains, a lot of us don't subscribe to the petty plays for power and politicking in the clan. I have too much going on with the law firm. Ty's busy being sheriff. I could name fifty other foxes just wanting to get by day to day without tripping over another Silver Fox ordinance. I could care less about your uncle's motion to push arranged marriages, because I'm not going to do it. Neither are most of the single males and females I've talked to. I figure we just need to wait out some of our older members before we establish new policies for our kind."

She shook her head, recognizing the look of a fox planning mischief.

"Before I get ahead of myself, I want to know if you plan on leaving me again anytime soon." Gerald looked so put out she had to laugh. "It's not funny. Billie Stamford types maybe ten words a minute. The raptor is ancient and thinks she knows what's best for me." He shuddered. "She keeps trying to pair me with her granddaughter. Now I don't care if she's a fox, eagle or bear, but Susie Stamford is as dumb as a rock."

"Ouch. You've been using Billie as my replacement?"

He glared at her. "Yeah. Nell and Jennifer were busy. Thanks a lot. You were supposed to return days ago and didn't. No word, nothing. Billie was the best I could get."

"I'm sorry. But if Ty explained the situation, you know I was only trying to help Meghan."

He nodded. "I know. But stop leaving. Between Ty and myself, we'll work the council into allowing Meghan to date and eventually marry this outsider, if you think it'll come to that."

"*Work* the council? Don't you mean, *trick* the council?"

"Your word, not mine." Gerald's eyes glinted with mischief. "Now let's talk about what's really bothering you."

“Nothing’s bothering me.” *Except that the whole time we’ve been talking, I keep thinking about Ty.*

“Julia, I know you. Go ahead. Ask me anything you want to know about him. I won’t tell, I promise. Trust me, I have no intention of pissing off the only woman who can read my handwriting, run the office and make a decent pot of coffee.”

She sighed. Might as well. “Should I believe him when he says he likes me?” *When he says he’ll be loyal? That those other women meant nothing to him?*

“Ty doesn’t lie. Okay, he does; he’s a fox. But not about what’s important to him. Julia, I’d trust him with my life, my law practice and my mate, should I ever be lucky enough to find one. He’s a genuinely decent man, someone this town needs more than it knows.”

“But what if being with me drags him down?”

He shook his head. “Not a chance. You have no idea how important you are to him. Oh, he would never admit it, but for years when I teased him about you, he’d get that look in his eye. He had a way of asking about you without asking about you. Inquiring about things he knew you’d been a part of just so I’d tell him what you were doing without it looking like he asked about you.”

“I’m not sure what you just said.”

Gerald scoffed. “As if I couldn’t see right through him. You’re one of the few women who wouldn’t give him any attention, and the only one who mattered.”

“But he’s dated so many women.”

“So have I. But I’ve never cheated on any of them, and neither has Ty. He’s got a strict code about integrity. He doesn’t just lead, he leads by example. And he’s way into you, Julia.”

“I don’t know.” She wanted badly to believe. It would be so nice to trust, to rely on someone else for a change instead of always having to take care of everyone herself. Her aunt and uncle might as well have been the enemy. When push came to shove, she knew they’d throw her and her sisters out the door to save their own skin.

“You want proof? Wait until he comes home. I’ll show you.”

She didn’t understand what he meant and frankly didn’t want to know. They talked about a recent case Gerald had picked up and about how badly Billie ran the office.

When Ty returned several hours later, Julia had nearly dozed off next to Gerald.

Gerald poked her in the arm to get her attention. “Okay, watch this.”

“What—?”

Gerald grabbed her hand and leaned closer. “I’m telling you, Julia. You’re the one for me. Ty will never know if we—”

Ty cut him off by throwing him against a wall. Ty snarled and would have rammed his fist into Gerald’s face had Gerald not twisted out of his grasp. The attorney raced to Julia, dragged her to her feet and held her in front of him like a shield.

“Let her go and fight me, you prick,” Ty growled, moving forward with a diamond-bright glare.

“Hell, no. You’ll kill me.” Gerald laughed, breathless. “I told you. He’s got it bad.”

Julia wanted to punch Gerald herself. “You’re crazy, you know that? Ty, he’s kidding.”

Ty advanced and tried to go through Julia. “I’ll bet he was.”

Good Lord, but he was incredible. His dark hair framed a harsh face filled with menace. He clenched his fists and his forearms stood out in stark relief, the muscles on his lean frame making her breathless.

“And that’s my cue,” Gerald murmured and took off.

The door closed behind him, but only Julia’s hands kept Ty from charging after him.

“Relax.” She stroked Ty’s chest, remembering how he’d looked without his shirt. The feel of his power addicted, aroused and made her yearn. She buried her nose in his throat. “You smell so good.”

Ty kissed the top of her head and hugged her. “I can kill him later.” He tugged her closer, and she felt his erection pressing her belly. “I’d rather play with you now.”

He kissed her and the time for talk faded. Worry, fear and anger disappeared as passion filled her with an emotion she didn’t want to but couldn’t help feel—love for the man who’d claimed her. Maybe it was time to claim him right back.

Chapter Eight

Ty didn't know what the hell he'd walked into, but Julia still smelled like Julia. Gerald hadn't tried anything more serious than holding her hand. Ty would pummel his best friend tomorrow. Right now, he couldn't get over how good his woman felt in his arms. The slender fox, so sleek and pretty, stirred his desire like no other. He had to force himself to slow down, to savor her.

"I want you so much," he said thickly. "In a bed this time."

She nodded shyly, her golden eyes shining with lust and a deeper emotion he wanted desperately to believe. He'd been rough and possessive, but now he wanted to be gentle. To show his vixen he could care for her, soothe her with—

"Fuck."

With deft fingers she unfastened his pants, and her hand curled around his cock, hot flesh to hot flesh.

He groaned, aching. "I want to last."

"Later," she breathed.

To his shock, she sank to her knees before him and peeled down his clothing. His jeans sagged at his thighs, but his cock remained ramrod stiff, trembling under her hot breath.

"Julia," he said on a groan, and watched as she slowly opened her mouth around the head of his shaft.

So erotic. Better than any fantasy he could imagine. His mate on her knees, pleasuring him. He threaded his fingers in her dark red hair and rubbed circles over her scalp, careful to be gentle when his body urged him to grip her tight and fuck that mouth with punishing thrusts.

"So good," he rasped as she licked and sucked, laving the underside of his crown with a tongue that felt like silk. "Julia, I'm going to come if you keep this up."

She answered by cupping his sac and taking more of him in her mouth. He wasn't that far in, but she worked the most sensitive part of his cock. Her nimble hands rubbed his thighs, his balls, and teased his ass. The contrast of her soft hands and his hard body aroused him, increasing his urge to protect, to claim.

He wanted to spill inside her sex, to flood her womb with come. But he'd never last. Already the surge of ecstasy built at the base of his spine, traveled up his balls and spread through the rest of his body.

He tightened his hold on her head, keeping her still as he pushed short, firm jerks between her ripe lips.

"I'm coming. Baby, swallow me."

She moaned and sucked harder, rubbing his balls with firm hands.

He glanced down to see her nipples pressing against her shirt. Dark red hair framed her face and his cock. Her scent intensified and her tongue whipped him into a frenzy he could no longer hold back.

He jetted down her throat with a hoarse shout of her name.

Ty finally ceased, weakened on trembling legs. She let him fall from her mouth and pulled up his pants. She fastened them and smoothed her hands down his front.

“Better now?” The sly look in her eyes warned him to tread warily.

“Almost.” *Shit.*

Her eyes creased with a smile.

“So, you think you can control me with sex,” he said softly.

“Think? I *know* I can control you with sex.” She placed her hands on her hips, her tone light. Flirty?

He grinned, loving this side of her. “Okay, so I’m easy. But, baby, I give as good as I get.” He took her in his arms before she could run and carried her into his bedroom.

“You’re a neat freak too.”

“What can I say? I have control issues. Like someone else I know.”

She smiled at him and twined her arms around his neck. Their lips pressed together as he lowered her to his bed. The kiss turned from exploratory to carnal. Much as he tried to slow things down, Julia wouldn’t let him. A real firecracker in bed. His woman.

He stripped her clothes off and removed his.

Looking down at her with just the setting sun over her body, Ty fell deeper under her spell. “I’ve never seen a more beautiful picture in all my life,” he whispered with reverence.

He traced a finger over her neck, down her throat to her delicate collarbone. The milky white mounds of her breasts ended in rosy tips tight with arousal. He lowered to take one nipple in his mouth, sucking before biting with a gentle sting.

She moaned and arched into him, stroking his hair with possession.

Ty turned to her other breast and laved her flesh while he plumped her sleek curves with large hands. He looked darker against her unblemished skin, so male against her feminine loveliness.

“Ty, take me.” Julia squirmed under him, caging his hips with her strong legs.

But he refused to be pushed. He lingered over her breasts, tasting and playing. He nipped her when she tried to pull him to her and laughed at her frustration.

“Oh no. I’m not stopping until I get a taste of that sweet cream you’re hiding.”

She writhed, rubbing against his swelling dick.

“You are so sexy. I bet you taste like honey.” He kissed down her belly, each hip, and bypassed her shaved mound to the inside of her thighs.

Moisture pooled between her legs, her need strong and growing stronger the more he played.

“You’re driving me crazy. Please,” she panted, petting his hair, his shoulders, any bit of him she could reach.

Ty slid a finger between her folds, parting her so he could better see her beautiful response. Swollen and wet, her sex beckoned him closer. He closed his mouth over her clit and pushed his finger inside her.

She bucked against his mouth and he groaned, consumed by her essence. Everything about the woman resonated on his level. He thrust his tongue into her, lapping up her scent now ingrained into his brain. She grew wet for him. Not anyone else, but Ty.

He toyed with her pussy, eating her and fucking her with first one finger then two. Her nub grew taut, filling out as she neared her climax. Her breathy cries pierced the remaining, crumbling walls around his heart until he fell headlong into love. So deep, so fast, he wanted to sink inside her and never leave.

“Come for me, baby. Come hard,” he rasped.

She cried out and shook, clenching his fingers tight as she spasmed. Enthralled with her response, he ignored the pull on his cock and continued to caress and put pressure on the tight bud under his thumb, wringing out her pleasure until she was spent.

“No more,” she groaned and sagged beneath him.

“Just a little bit more,” he said thickly and climbed on top of her. Pushing past her swollen folds, he eased into her snug sheath, ready to blow. It didn’t take him but three thrusts until he came inside her, showering her with more of his come.

She wrapped her arms around him, kissing his chest as he spent. Content to remain inside her forever, he didn’t move until she nudged him.

“You’re getting heavy.”

He groaned and withdrew, leaving a mess all over her thighs. “You smell like me. I like it.”

“Alpha jerk.” She snuggled into his arms, and the moment felt surreal.

“Please don’t tell me I’m dreaming.”

“I could say the same.”

Thoughts swirled and danced, images of potential tomorrows if he didn’t muck up today. He had never taken as big a risk as he was about to. But he couldn’t hold it back any longer. Ty prided himself on truth and fairness. He couldn’t deny himself or her for one more minute. “Julia?”

“Hmm?” She sounded half asleep.

“I love you.”

She froze then leaped on top of him. Her cute little nose twitched. “Say that again.”

Ty sighed, lost to everything but the fiery woman of his dreams. “I love you. The hot redhead with a temper and the cool professional who works for my *ex*-best friend. I’ve been in lust with you forever. In love with you for minutes, days, hell, probably years. You’re loyal to your sisters, you love with all your heart, and I want to spend the rest of my life pissing you off.”

She blinked at him, her eyes so wide he could fall into her dark pupils. "Pissing me off?" she whispered.

"You get me hard when you're mad. So damned aroused I can't see straight. And you're so pretty, so sleek and soft. And sly." He rubbed his hands over her back and down her ass. "You wrapped me around your little finger, baby. I'm yours. No one's ever mattered but you."

A huge smile curved her lips. "You are so slick. No wonder you're the best at what you do. No one can deliver a line like you, Tyler Roderick."

He winced. "I hate being called Tyler."

"I know."

He chuckled then sobered and kissed her. "It's no line, Julia. I love you."

He waited for what felt like three forevers.

"I..."

The damned woman was stringing him along. He could see it in her eyes, but he let her play.

"I think... Maybe..."

"Dammit."

"No, I know I love you too. But, Ty—"

He cut her off with a kiss that deepened into something more.

"I don't want my past to hurt our future," Julia murmured when he let her go.

"Then don't give in to fear. I'm not your dad. You're not your mom. There's nothing in this world that could make me leave you. Hell, if I die, I'll come back and haunt your sexy ass."

She laughed. "How romantic."

"Honey, you want romance? I'm your man. Candles, chocolates, flowers, you name it."

She sighed. "How about you secure my family's place in Cougar Falls? That's as romantic as I need."

"Consider it done."

She blinked. "Really?"

"Really. I didn't share your secrets with Gerald for the hell of it. As I see it, we have two choices if we want to stay in Cougar Falls. We join the cats, which, technically, makes sense since you're part cat. Or, we tell the council to fuck themselves because we're mating, we're staying, and that's that."

"But, Ty, they could make trouble for you. Maybe strip you as sheriff. Run your family out of the clan."

"Nah. My mom and dad are pretty much entrenched with the Silver Foxes. Hey, if they have someone who can do my job better than me, so be it. I'll find something else to do. I'm good with my hands." He stroked a finger between her buttocks.

"Stop." She smacked his chest. "I'm serious. I don't want to hurt you."

"Then don't leave me. Stay with me. Love me. Have my kits, cats, whatever."

“Oh, God. What if our kids are cats?”

“What if they are? Can you really tell me you’d love them any less?” He narrowed his eyes, understanding what he’d missed before. “Do you love Gabby any less?”

“Of course not. Of course not,” she repeated softly, her face full of wonder. “You really don’t care, do you?”

“No, I don’t. And honestly, I don’t think many other people will either. You’ve spent your life apart from most people, honey, pushed away by your bitchy relatives. No more. My parents won’t care. Hell, my mother will hang a medal on you for finally tying me down.”

“You did play around a lot.”

He liked her jealousy, until she pinched him. “Ow. Dammit. I’m telling you, they were substitutes for you. And I didn’t sleep with half my rumored number of conquests.” He didn’t think. “I’m a one-woman man. You’re mine, I’m yours, end of story.”

“Yeah, end of story,” she reaffirmed with a steely-eyed glare.

He chuckled and pulled her closer. “Hot damn, I love you, Julia Easton. Will you marry me?”

She kissed him and squirmed, her taut breasts doing funny things to his libido once more. “I’m not sure. What will my fiancé think if I run away with you?”

“Who, Ned?” he teased. “I say we don’t invite him. One party crasher is one too many.”

“You got that right.”

“Good. Now that we have that out of the way, I want you to tell me exactly what Gerald said and did while I was gone.”

She laughed, but she made him work hard for his answers.

Julia spent the rest of the night with Ty. He dropped her off at her place on his way to work the next morning.

“Hmm, a kiss from my vixen. I like this.”

“You should. I’m worth it,” she drawled.

He chuckled and playfully pushed her out the truck door. “I’ll see you at lunch. And later tonight we’ll shop for a ring. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Julia wondered if she’d ever tire of hearing it. Seeing a big, strong man like Ty look at her with such tenderness made her melt inside. God, was he really hers?

She went through the house, not expecting to see Gabby since her sister rarely roused before ten unless she had to. After a nice, long shower, Julia changed into clean clothes and mentally prepared the rest of her day. She needed to talk to Gabby about the future as well. Deciding to tell everyone about their father affected them all. Though Meghan had pushed to tell the truth for years, Julia needed to know what

Gabby truly thought. After all, Meghan intended to live away from Cougar Falls. Gabby would be here around Ac-taw who might or might not scorn her for her differences.

Julia flushed with shame, aware her worries about raising a mixed child echoed those of an ignorant, fear-based bigot. She was damned proud of Gabby, a smart and funny woman with a sunny attitude and the strength of a lioness. Ty and Gerald were right. She needed to think of her background as blessed and not a freakish happenstance.

She was finishing her bagel, deep in thought, when Gabby joined her at the counter.

"You look way too perky for the Julia I know and love," Gabby grumbled, and pushed a lock of hair out of her eyes.

"Gabby, I love you."

"I love you too." Gabby hunted in the refrigerator for something.

"I'm proud of who you are. I think your cat is beautiful, and I don't think we should hide it anymore."

Gabby straightened and turned, clearly surprised. "What brought this on?"

"I'm in love and I'm getting married."

"Say that again?"

"I'm in love with Ty. He asked me to marry him, and I said yes."

Gabby rushed to Julia for a hug and babbled with joy. "Oh my gosh. I'm so incredibly happy for you. I guess this means I'm losing my roommate. But that's okay. Now I can finally get rid of those hideous blue curtains."

"Please. And replace them with what? Blinds?" Julia made a face. "Tacky."

"Have you told Meghan yet?"

Julia shook her head. "I couldn't get a hold of her."

Gabby frowned. "Me neither. I called her twice yesterday. I thought we could meet up in Whitefish for breakfast this morning but she didn't answer."

Julia had a funny feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Try her again."

Gabby's smile faded. She hurried to the phone and punched in Meghan's number. "Her voicemail."

Life didn't seem so bright all of a sudden. "I have a bad feeling about this. Do you have Jason's number?"

"Yeah. Hold on." Gabby raced into her bedroom. She returned moments later, her face drawn. "I called him. Nothing."

"Let me get a hold of Ty."

"Don't go anywhere without me. I'm getting dressed. Be right there."

Two hours later, Julia, Gabby and Ty drove into Whitefish together. They parked at Chastell Tours, where Grady Chastell stood waiting for them off the deck of his office building. Dean and Grady ran the

actual tours while their brother, Burke, handled the business from his office in Cougar Falls, a short half hour away.

Grady nodded to them, his whole mien predatory. “Dean’s running some errands, but Monty’s here. We’ll need him for this. Ty, I checked Meghan’s hotel room but found nothing. Not a scent at all. I don’t like this.”

Ty frowned and herded them all inside the building. “Did anyone see you?”

“Not that I could tell. I waited for the maid to clean up then pretended I was the next tenant. I could barely smell a thing. Only the barest trace of Meghan and a male with her. And that’s damn odd.”

The four of them glanced at one another. Julia’s heart broke at the sudden worry on Ty’s face. “Ty?”

He sighed. “I’m sorry, baby. But that’s a common Hunter ploy. They mask scent. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’d followed Grady back here. I’m sure someone out there is locked onto us by now.”

Monty entered through the back door to Chastell Tours and closed it behind him. “You mean the pair of assholes wearing flannel in that pickup a block away? You can’t see them, but one of the guys is standing by a flagpole using binoculars.”

“How the hell did you get here so fast?” Ty asked.

Julia didn’t care. She wanted as many people as she could to help find her sister. Hunters? How could Meghan have been captured by Hunters?

Grady slapped Monty on the back. “He’s helping me out today. And a good thing. He’s spent the last few years dealing with Hunters. We need to handle this the right way and Monty’s our man.”

“See, Ty? I’m good for something besides trouble.” Monty grinned, but his smile softened into concern as he looked at Julia and Gabby. “It’s okay, ladies. Between Ty, Grady and myself, we’ll fetch your pretty little sister back.”

Grady nodded.

Tears filled Julia’s eyes. If anything happened to her sister, she didn’t know what she’d do. Despite her troubles with Meghan, family meant everything to Julia. Meghan *had* to be all right.

“We’ll find her,” Ty said with quiet assurance. “Grady, do me a favor and call Cullen Whitefeather. Explain the situation but keep it brief. I don’t want anyone else to know about this. Cullen can help us. We need eyes in the sky.”

“Not necessary. I called for help an hour ago when Grady mentioned you were after Hunters, and Cullen volunteered his brother Sean. He knows what to do, and he’ll keep it quiet.”

“Good thinking.” Ty nodded.

“Sean Whitefeather?” Julia tried to process everything.

Ty answered her. “While you were in Washington, your buddy Sarah fought a clan duel, got a corrupt raptor leader and his family kicked out of town, and mated Cullen, Sean’s brother.”

“Cullen’s not comfortable leaving Sarah alone right now, with all the clan unrest, so Sean’s helping instead,” Monty said.

“I had no idea.” Lost in worries about Meghan, Julia had missed her best friend’s major life changes. “Oh my God. I hope Sarah’s all right.”

Monty chuckled. “Honey, Sarah is more than all right. She mated with a fierce raptor. The idiot’s so in love with her it’s not funny.” Monty glanced from Ty to Julia. “A lot like someone else I know.”

Ty glared but said nothing.

Grady shook his head at Ty. “And another one bites the dust. Wait until I tell Burke.” He opened his mouth to speak again and closed it. He sniffed the air and eyed Gabby with a confused expression she studiously ignored.

“Now what?” Julia ran her hands through her hair and sought calm. But try as she might, she couldn’t think past her anxiety for her baby sister.

“Now we let Sean tail our new friends and see where they’ve stashed your sister,” Monty answered. “We’ll see how many Hunters there are and what we’re up against. I suggest we settle down and wait.”

“I don’t want to wait. I want to find my sister.” Her eyes changed, and she could feel her fangs and claws pushing for freedom. “Let’s drag the information out of the ones spying on us. Hell, it’s two of them against the five of us.”

“Six counting Sean. Good idea, Julia. I’ll help,” Gabby offered.

A chorus of male *noes* resounded.

Ty took the sting out of his rejection by explaining. “Julia, Monty saw two men, but we don’t know how many there are. I know you want action, but the smart thing is to study them and see where this leads. Trust me, this could get ugly quick.”

“I do trust you. But that’s Meghan out there. My little sister with the biggest mouth.” Julia threw herself down into a comfortable leather couch and stared into a warm fire. “Find her soon, Ty, or I’m going to get her with or without your help.”

Gabby nodded, supporting her sister. Ty clenched his jaw, breathed deep, and joined the men gathered across the room. They spoke in low voices, occasionally glancing at her and Gabby.

She ignored their chatter for the most part, worried sick about what Hunters might have done to Meghan.

“We’ll get her back, Julia. We will.” Gabby looked so earnest, so young.

Julia trusted Ty, she loved him, but *she* was responsible for her sister. Meghan had been Julia’s responsibility for twenty years. Her problems were Julia’s, not Ty’s.

“Yeah, we will.” Julia leaned closer to her sister. “While they’re making their plans, I think you and I need to make ours.”

Chapter Nine

Eight hours later, at a quarter to midnight, Ty, Sean, Monty and Grady waited outside an abandoned motel on the edge of town. The seedy outdoor building had one truck parked in its lot. The lights in the parking lot didn't work, and the dank smell of disuse made it plain that the neglected place hadn't seen visitors in a while. Sean's reconnaissance had shown them two Hunters in an upstairs room adjoined to the one in which Meghan and Jason sat, tied to chairs, bloodied and beaten, but alive.

He couldn't help being glad Julia and Gabby had stayed behind. If Julia saw her sister tied up in a place like this, in Meghan's current condition, she'd shit a brick.

But at least they only had the two men to worry about. The pair hadn't moved for several hours. They hadn't made any calls, and they hadn't received any visitors. The Hunters occupied a corner room on the second floor. On the side of the building, an overhang protected the hotel's dumpster.

Ty and his friends waited by the large bin, and Ty tried to keep a calm head. He had to be cool and in control for Julia. God, he loved her so damned much. Nothing would hurt her if he could help it.

He had a hard time believing Ned Williams Senior and another male he hadn't met were behind this kidnapping, but he'd spotted them earlier with his own eyes. Hell, he'd watched a fucking basketball game with the senior Williams. How could he not have sensed a Hunter so close?

"Don't worry about it, Ty. They're hard to detect," Monty said softly, using the mental pathways of the Ac-taw. He wagged his silver tail as he sat atop the wide trash bin and kept his head cocked, listening for any sign of trouble.

Grady curled his tail around his legs. He sat on the cold hard ground, his eyes flashing with anger. Like Monty, he'd shifted into his animal spirit, a cinnamon-colored mountain lion. Sean perched high on a telephone pole next to them, a golden eagle watching the hotel with piercing eyes. Only Ty remained in a man's form, gun in hand, ready to go into action as soon as the moon disappeared behind the clouds again.

They had to make the funniest sight. A man, a wolf, a cougar and an eagle. Sounded like the beginning of a very bad joke.

Grady rumbled, *"No offense, Ty, but what the hell are you doing taking a mate? When did you have the time? I just saw you on Sunday and you were happily single, or am I wrong?"* He studied Ty like a bug under a microscope.

Monty scoffed. *"Come on, Grady. You know he's always had it bad for Julia. Never could take his eyes off her in school."*

Ty answered, *“Shut up, Monty. You were too busy staying out of school—suspended—to know jack shit about me then.”*

“Yep,” Monty continued. *“Used to moon over her like a strung-up calf needing its momma. Julia, look at meeee.”*

The tension remained high, but the burst of humor lightened it.

Then Monty’s smile left him. *“Ty, you sure not calling in the wolf pack was a wise idea? Gray wolves are good for something, you know. We take Hunter business very seriously.”*

“Normally I’d say yes. But I want Shifters I can trust on this. And no offense, but your pack is trying to gut one another half the time. I’m never sure who’s even in charge anymore.”

“You have a point. And no offense taken. They’re not my pack any longer.” Monty smiled at Grady. *“I’m a pussy now, haven’t you heard?”*

Overhead, Sean sputtered with laughter.

Grady glared at Monty. *“I hate that,”* he muttered and glanced up at Sean. *“Shut it, bird, before I have chicken for dinner.”*

Sean didn’t bat an eye. *“Chicken for dinner? Please. I could slice you from tooth to tail with one swipe of my talons. Hell, my wingspan is longer than your entire body...you big pussy.”* He ruffled his feathers, a shot of bird laughter Ty shared.

Grady interrupted. *“A bunch of comedians. A fur ball and a featherbrain. Now how about we get back to rescuing Meghan?”*

Ty added, *“And Jason. Looks like the outsider needs help as well. I shouldn’t be surprised Ned turned on his own son, but I am.”*

“How do you know the kid’s not in on it?” Monty asked.

“Instinct. He would do anything for Meghan. I don’t buy him hurting her.” He frowned.

The wind whipped, and the clouds covered the moon. Black night filled the sky.

“Now,” Ty ordered.

Sean flew to land on top of the roof over the room, their lookout, while Grady and Monty darted up the stairway and stopped, waiting on either side of the outside hall, just out of sight around the corner from the room.

Ty made as much noise as possible as he walked up the stairway, past Grady and Monty, down the hallway and halted at the door. He deliberately put himself at risk to distract the Hunters.

He banged on the door. *“Hey! Williams! I’m here to talk.”* He fingered the gun tucked into his back.

The door swung open to reveal a long barrel pointed right at him. The man he didn’t recognize stood with Ned Williams Jr. *Junior?* What the hell?

“Roderick. Finally,” Ned said with a grim smile.

Ty had been expecting the senior Williams. *“Where’s your dad?”*

The other man holding the rifle motioned for him to enter and get down. “He’s around. On your face, hands spread wide.”

Ty slowly laid down and stretched out his arms on either side of him.

Ned grabbed Ty’s gun and patted him down. He also kneed Ty in the side and in the small of his back.

“Fuck,” Ty swore.

“Not too close, Junior,” the man warned. “Roderick, you even blink wrong, I’ll shoot you.”

Closer, closer. Come on, asshole.

Ned leaned down again.

Ty tensed, already moving when the rifle cracked. A slug entered his calf, the burn like fire across his leg. But it didn’t stop him. His arm shot out and wrapped around Ned’s neck.

Ty squeezed hard. “I’ll break it.”

The man with the rifle shrugged. “Cost of doing business. Hunter’s loss.”

“Uncle Gil!” Ned gurgled, pulling at Ty’s tightening forearm.

“We told you to go home. Your daddy warned you not to follow, but you wouldn’t listen. And now this. At least die with dignity, Junior.” Gil shook his head. Just as he tightened his finger on the trigger, a huge mountain lion jumped through the open door and slammed into him.

The round entered the wall an inch above Ty’s head.

Grady roared and clamped his mouth over Gil’s neck while Gil fought to stab Grady with a knife he’d pulled out of his boot. He managed to plunge the knife into Grady’s side before Monty arrived. The wolf quickly assessed the situation, hooked his teeth into Gil’s hand and bit hard.

Gil yelled out in pain and continued to fight.

Ned, however, stood frozen in Ty’s grip, no longer protesting his lack of oxygen.

“Where is he?” Ty asked.

Ned didn’t answer, still staring in shock at the gory scene taking place in front of him. Grady hissed as he gnawed through flesh to bone, ripping Gil’s neck clean out. Monty spat out Gil’s hand that now lay several feet from Gil’s dead body.

“Your fucking father. Where is he?” Ty snarled.

“Not here. You won’t find him before he kills all you freaks,” Ned spat. “So much for your big plan, Uncle Gil. Gil Williams, the great Hunter, is fucking *dead*.” Ned laughed hysterically.

Ty applied enough pressure to knock Ned unconscious. He grabbed the gun Ned had taken from him and hurried through the door to the adjoining room. A corner of the floor looked ragged and broken, and he wondered if that’s how Ned Sr. had managed to leave the room without detection. Jason sagged in his chair, but Meghan screamed around her gag and fought to break free of her ropes.

After quickly untying her, Ty hugged her tight. “It’s okay, Meghan. I’ve got you.”

She struggled against him, and it took him a moment to hear her. When he did, he felt the blood drain from his face.

“He’s going after Julia. Ned Sr. and four other Hunters are going to kill her. Kill her and skin her. A new trophy for his wall.”

Gabby paced, unnerving Julia. “I don’t know. They told us to stay here. Maybe if we give them more time they’ll call.”

Julia scowled. “It’s been a half hour. And we’re just supposed to do what Ty says? Why? Because he’s a man and we’re women?”

Gabby’s wry smile boosted Julia’s confidence.

“Look, you stay here in case he calls back. I’m going to shift and sniff out anything I can. The motel where they’re keeping Meghan is only a short distance from here.”

“Just be careful.” Gabby hugged her then resumed her pacing.

“Always.”

Julia quickly stripped off her clothing and let her animal spirit take over. She embraced the call of her fox and trotted out the back door Gabby held open. And froze in place.

There, at the base of the steps, stood Ned Williams Sr., a pistol aimed right at her.

“Yessirree. I knew you’d shift soon as you felt safe. Been waiting for hours, though. What with your menfolk gone, I swore you’d hightail it out of here sooner.” He stepped forward and Julia growled as she backed up into the building. Ned Sr. stopped inside the back door and included Gabby in the conversation. “Gabby, glad to see you. Makes this a lot easier. Julia, you change back right now. Slow-like, or I’ll put a bullet in her brain.” He aimed the gun at Gabby.

With no choice, Julia turned human once more. She stood tall in front of Ned Sr., wishing she wore more than skin, especially when four more men entered behind him. Two of them looked Ned Sr.’s age, but the other two were younger, larger, and seemed more threatening.

Oh shit. We are really screwed. She backed away and stood next to Gabby, who tried to block the men’s view of her. Nudity didn’t normally bother her, but under the strangers’ stares, she felt dirty.

“Uh-uh, Gabby. Let us see that pretty sister of yours.”

“Damn, Ned. We hit the mother lode.” One of the men tipped back a hat with the tip of a large knife. He had mean eyes, a nasty smile and smelled like the oil he’d used to clean his knife.

The others laughed.

“Nice tits. I can see why my boy took a hankering,” Ned said as one of the men closed the door behind them. “Finely put together, ain’t ya?” Ned’s beady gaze snaked over her form and lingered between her thighs. “So you’re foxes, huh?”

He acted as if he had all the time in the world and crossed to sit on a chair, facing her.

“You saw that I am.”

“Her too?” He gestured to Gabby. “You all skinwalkers?”

Julia and Gabby exchanged a glance. Skinwalkers?

Ned Sr. nodded. “Thought so. You people killed my daddy in the middle of a hunt. Think it was a wolf that did him in. We have a few of you mounted down at the field house. Harry does nice work.” He motioned to one of the older men with him. “After we have some fun with you two, I plan on putting you in my bedroom. You’re a pretty little fox, Julia.”

The others snickered.

“Figures you need five men to fight two women.” Gabby snorted. “Old man like you? I doubt you’ll give us any problems. The younger ones will, maybe even that old coot.” She gave Harry a quick glance. “But you? I’d be surprised if you know what your cock is for anymore other than pissing.”

Ned’s face reddened with anger.

Holy shit. When the hell had Gabby gotten such a vulgar vocabulary? And why the hell did she have to use it here?

“Shut up, Gabby,” Julia growled.

Gabby shook her thick hair, fluffing it around her face. “You think *she’s* pretty? I’m much better looking.”

Julia didn’t know what Gabby thought she was doing, and she didn’t want to know. Too much attention had shifted to her younger sister.

“Gabby—”

“Hard to tell how pretty you are, dressed in so many clothes.” One of the younger men nodded at her clothing. He stood with his rifle over his shoulder.

“My tits are much bigger.” Gabby stripped out of her clothes in record time and shoved her chest forward. “See?”

Dumbfounded, Julia tried to think of what her sister meant to do. Getting naked usually preceded shifting... *Shifting*. Finally comprehending the sly glance Gabby shot Ned Sr., the only man pointing a weapon in their direction, Julia threw herself into the role.

“This is not the time for theatrics, Gabrielle.”

Gabby turned to face her, her hands on her hips. “Oh please. It’s never the time. And I’m sick of your jealousy, always having to be the center of attention. Let’s face it, I’m prettier than you, more popular, and much, much faster, on two feet or four.”

“Uh, wait—” Ned Sr. tried to wrestle back control of the situation.

Gabby wouldn’t let him. Julia had to hand it to her, the woman had a gift for theater. Like Meghan, drama must run in the blood.

"I could have any of these men like that." Gabby snapped her fingers. "Can you say the same?"

"You bet." Julia glanced at one of the younger Hunters. "You. Come here. Show her I'm the one you want. And have I mentioned what I can do with my tongue?"

The men stared at her, looked at one another, and relaxed their stances. All but Ned Sr., who frowned at the group. "Hell. This don't make no sense. You two, shut up. Harry, Mike, tell your boys to—"

"You don't tell us what to do, Ned," one of the boys argued. "We got two naked women right here. You want to skin her after? Fine. First I'm getting a good fuck."

Gabby huffed. "Good? Try great. Once we're done, you won't be thinking of skinning me. Now her, on the other hand..."

"You bitch!" Julia yanked her sister by the hair, pulling her close.

"Shit. Catfight." The other younger man pulled up a chair and watched, enthralled.

"You got that right. Now!" Julia yelled and shifted in seconds.

Gabby did the same, and they attacked Ned Sr. and the other male holding a gun. Julia bit Ned Sr. hard, then scratched his throat and face. She kicked him off his chair and went for another set of unfamiliar hands as they tried to pry her from the man.

The men might have expected a smaller fox. No one anticipated tangling with a full-grown cougar. Gabby roared and bit and swiped at everyone.

A shot fired and Gabby shrieked. Julia tried to help her but could only gasp as a knife slashed her shoulder and grazed her throat. She yipped in pain.

"Gabby! Are you all right?"

"I'm hit, but I'll live. Can't say the same for that motherfucker." The cat launched herself at the man who'd shot her and ripped his throat out.

Two of the men were scratched but moving. Ned Sr. still struggled on the floor, whimpering as he cradled his windpipe.

The burn on Julia's shoulder throbbed, but she had to grab the gun that still sat way too close to Ned.

Before she could reach it, the window crashed inward and a huge golden eagle went for one of the men looming over Gabby. A wolf followed him and rushed inside to stand over another of the men, growling in warning. A loud roar signaled Grady was near, but it was Ty who entered through the broken window first, the fox darting nimbly over broken glass and bodies to get to her.

"Julia! Baby, you okay?"

She opened her mouth to woof a yes when Ty leapt over her onto Ned Sr. Ty bit the man's hand, forcing him to release the pistol he'd been holding. Snarling and barking, Ty ripped into Ned Sr. until all that remained of the threatening Hunter was a bloody mess.

Monty quickly turned human and rushed for a phone. Julia dimly heard him calling someone before she started to waver on her feet. *"Gabby. She's hurt,"* she tried to warn Ty, but had trouble focusing to send thoughts past the pain in her neck.

Monty's voice rose. "Christ! Guys, call for help. Julia's bleeding, bad. Bastard cut her throat!"

Ty shoved him away. *"Come on, baby. You have to stay awake. Shift so you can speed the healing. Please, Julia. I can't lose you. Not now. I love..."*

She tried to hold on, to tell him how much she loved him as well, but she faded and heard nothing more.

Ty experienced fear like he'd never felt before. His life, his very future, flashed before his eyes as he watched Julia collapse in front of him. Turning human once more, he put pressure on the wound at her throat, amazed at how much it bled. She'd been moving all over the place, covered with spatters of blood when he'd first come through the window. He's assumed most of it came from the men she'd fought, since she moved without pain. He hadn't noticed more than her wounded shoulder.

Monty panted by his side, one hand holding a cell phone to his ear. "No shit, Doc. We're in Whitefish. I need aid for a small female fox. Throat slashed, shoulder damage. She's looking bad." He paused and glanced over at Gabby, who was protected by a growling Grady. "We also have a mountain lion who's been shot. Not life threatening. Looks like she took a bullet in the left flank. Yeah, we need you now." Monty disconnected the call. "Idiot. Why the fuck would I be calling on the emergency line if it wasn't an emergency?"

Ty held tight to Julia and used a bandage someone handed him to help staunch the blood flow from her wounds. It seemed like hours passed while he whispered for her to wake up. The others moved around him, but nothing touched him except the terror of living without the woman he loved.

When she moaned under him, his heart nearly stopped. Hope made him lightheaded. "Julia?"

"Ty?" she whimpered.

"Shift back for me, baby. Please. You need to turn. I know it hurts, but you'll stop bleeding when you do."

She groaned. Tears filled her eyes and she whined with the pain, but slowly, her fur receded, her eyes changed back, and her claws and fangs retracted. A woman's flesh trembled under his hands.

"Thank God." He cradled her to his chest, shaking with relief. "Hell, Julia, don't do that to me ever again." He stroked her over and over as he whispered how much he loved her. How much he needed her.

"Ty?" she asked in a scratchy voice.

He kissed her forehead and met her pain-filled gaze.

"Yeah?"

"I love you too." She smiled and closed her eyes.

Later in the early a.m., back in Cougar Falls, Julia lay in Ty's bed, in his house, under the supervision of an Ac-taw nurse Ty insisted remain close by. He sat in the living room with Gabby and the others. His friends stood around, quietly discussing the repercussions of the night's events.

Monty passed by him on his way to the kitchen, most likely to replace the empty beer bottle he carried. "Hey, Ty. The Order's got it covered."

Ty nodded. The gray wolves had contacts in the government and local law enforcement. Instances like these normally went through the wolves. By tomorrow, no one would know anything about the Hunters they'd encountered, living or dead. He didn't want to know how they handled the situation, only that they did. He now thought he had a better appreciation of why the council tolerated the Order's animalistic chaos. Wolves *were* good for something, after all.

"Thanks, Monty."

Monty nodded and left for the kitchen.

Grady sat down next to Ty, a huge smile on his face. "So you and Julia, huh? I never thought the vixen could fight as well as she did. She really tore into those guys."

"She sure did," Ty said with pride. She and Gabby had held their own, and he couldn't be prouder of either one of them.

"Yeah, I always liked Julia."

Ty growled. "If you value your health, don't like her so much."

Grady chuckled. "Don't worry. She's all yours. I'm holding out for a cat." He glanced at Gabby, full of wonder. "She is so hot. Holy Christ, when I saw her animal, I nearly had a coronary. I thought Gabby was a fox. I mean, a literal one. Not just a hot piece of ass."

Gabby turned and glared at him. Then she sniffed and turned back to Sean, who had the nerve to wiggle his brows at Grady, taunting him.

"The Easton women seem to have that effect on men." Ty knew it wasn't his place to divulge Gabby's secret, but the time had obviously come to tell one and all. Though he and his friends had remained quiet about just what they'd seen this night, the truth would come out sooner than later. For his own part, he didn't want his own child to grow up ashamed of any part of his or herself. He'd be damned if he'd let assholes like Lynn and Harry Easton oppress Julia and her sisters any longer.

Grady continued to stare at Gabby while he spoke to Ty. "Still, it must be nice, finding a woman all your own."

"It is. I just have to figure out a way to keep her. Julia's a little different than what the silver foxes are used to. I'm not sure we're going to stay with the clan."

Grady finally looked at him. "No shit? Well, you know you're welcome to live with us. Most of the councils in the other clans seem to be filled with pricks, sorry to say. Hell, except for us cats, and that's

because there are so few of us, every clan in town seems to have issues. The raptors are undergoing a major change after half their leadership fucked their way around rules. You silver foxes are stuck on yourselves, with all that heritage crap. The bears are growing so distant from the rest of us I wouldn't be surprised if they started their own town, and don't get me started on the wolves. Aside from Monty, the gray wolves annoy the shit out of me."

"Yeah, well, they're good at that."

"You should come stay with us. You know Burke sure as hell won't care, especially now that you have Julia. He's pretty possessive about Rachel, not that I blame him. She's so good for him, you know? It's nice to have a female cat around the house. She doesn't tolerate his attitude." Grady grinned. "We could use more women at the ranch. I like Julia. You I could tolerate if I had to."

"Keep it up, kitty." Ty laughed at the finger Grady shot him. "Seriously, though, Grady. Thanks."

Gabby took that moment to join them. Her limp was more than noticeable. The nurse had seen Gabby's leg and proclaimed it already on the mend. The bullet had passed clean through and Gabby had shifted from cat to human and back again a few times to speed her healing. What would normally take weeks would likely take days to get better.

"Should you be walking on that so soon?" Grady frowned.

She ignored him. "Ty, I'm so glad you found Meghan and Jason. They're bruised, but they'll heal, thank God. Meghan's sleeping soundly now, but when she wakes up, she's going to want to be with Jason again."

They'd called Jason's mother, anonymously, and given her his whereabouts after dropping Jason at an after-hours clinic. They left him after being assured he'd make a full recovery. At worst, he had some bruising and a few cuts that needed healing. Much like Meghan, who currently was sleeping off her ordeal in Ty's spare bedroom thanks to a prescribed sedative.

"I'm so glad Meghan's okay. What they could have done to her..." Gabby trailed off, and her eyes filled again.

Grady stood and gently led her away, offering her comfort in his arms. When he turned, Ty noticed the bloodstains on his shirt.

"Grady, make sure you get that looked at."

Grady nodded and tried, unsuccessfully, to avoid Gabby's interest in his wound. When the woman started chastising him for not caring for his own injuries and called for the nurse, she reminded Ty of Julia. Always trying to take charge.

He winced when he stretched out his left leg. Talk about taking care of injuries...

Sean loomed over him, shaking his head.

“What now?” Ty grumbled. “You know, as much as I appreciate all your help tonight, honesty compels me to tell the truth. You birds are a real pain in the ass. The hawk inside caring for Julia nearly snapped my head off when I asked her to stay a while.”

“You mean when you *told her* to stay. And yeah, Nurse McKane snapped, because she’s been trying to see to your leg but you won’t let her.” Sean stared down at him, too quiet.

“Hell. I’ll deal with my leg once the rest of you are—”

Sean and Monty hauled him to his feet and dragged him down the hallway toward the bedroom.

“Moron.” Sean stood a head taller than Ty and had a broader back and bigger arms. The bird probably watched himself lift weights and flexed at all hours of the day. The thought made Ty grin.

“The rest of us are fine,” Sean said. “Well, Monty and I are. We have a few cuts that have already started to heal. I think Grady’s knife wound is deeper than he’s let on.”

“I heard that,” Gabby snarled from the other room. “Grady Chastell, what the hell is wrong with you?”

“With me?” Ty heard Grady answer. “Darlin’, I’m just fine. I—”

Then Monty kicked Ty’s calf and streaks of pain shot through his leg to his brain, shorting out all thought.

“Yep. Bullet’s still in there.”

“Asshole,” Ty wheezed. “You could have just asked.”

Monty smiled, showing sharp white teeth. “Now, Sheriff. As a concerned citizen of Cougar Falls, I feel it’s my duty to see to it that our most senior lawman is taken care of.”

Sean had to add, “And as a member of the Raptor Clan, I feel it’s my duty to make sure you don’t abuse Nurse McKane. The woman just wants to do her job, so let her look at that leg or I’m filing an official complaint.”

“With who?” Ty felt like he was being dragged to the guillotine.

The look on Nurse McKane’s face was positively evil when he entered between Sean and Monty. The old bird smirked at him. “Oh good. Now let’s get a look at that leg.” She held up a needle. “This will dull the pain while I dig out the bullet.”

Feeling woozy, Ty let them carry him to the bed, where he lay down next to Julia.

“It’ll be okay, Ty,” she whispered, drowsy but aware as she looked at him.

Ty confessed the truth in a whisper, wishing the others weren’t standing so close. Shifter hearing made secrets virtually impossible in town. “It’s not the pain I’m worried about.” He cleared his throat. “It’s the needle.”

Sean and Monty burst out laughing.

Nurse McKane rolled her eyes. “Typical.”

“Do it for me, Ty. I need to know you’re okay.” Julia threaded her hand through his. “I’ll be right here with you.”

He squeezed her hand tight and stared up at the ceiling as Nurse Ratched stepped closer. “Right here with me. Don’t leave.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

“I love you, baby.” He swore when the needle pierced his leg and made the mistake of looking down.

He passed out cold.

Chapter Ten

Cougar Falls, one month later

"I feel like an overgrown mannequin. You sure about this?" Ty asked, uneasy. He pulled at his collar, relieved Julia hadn't made him wear a tux as she'd threatened.

"Yes. Now stop fidgeting."

They stood in the front pew watching the pending nuptials. Meghan looked like a vision in white. Jason stood by her side, his hand at the crook of her elbow. Ty had walked Meghan down the aisle, and Burke stood as Jason's best man. Grady's brother had taken a liking to the young man marrying Meghan.

The ceremony here would precede the one Jason and Meghan intended to have in Seattle, where Jason's relatives could attend. Jason's family had taken a hard hit. Tilda mourned her husband's death and son's disappearance—*gotta love those wolves*—but Jason's upcoming wedding, and the promise of grandchildren, helped her look to the future.

Jason glowed with happiness, despite the bruising that lingered due to a cracked jaw. He and Meghan had earned the approval of the town council, especially after Ty had put in a good word.

To Julia's shock, Meghan confided she'd shared the truth about her animal spirit with Jason months ago. The shifty vixen had known he would always be hers.

At that moment, Meghan looked over her shoulder at Julia. "*I love you*," she mouthed. Next to the bride, Gabby looked radiant in a dark blue gown. She winked and turned back to face the front. Meghan had been determined to put Julia in her wedding, but Julia hadn't wanted to miss any of it so was watching from the crowd. After all Julia had been through to help Meghan, the younger woman hadn't argued with her.

The chapel in Cougar Falls was filled to capacity. Though Jason's family couldn't be present to witness this joining, the Catamount Pride had officially adopted him, just after they'd graciously welcomed Julia, Gabby, Meghan and Ty. Rachel Chastell had officiated Jason's induction into the pride with a small ceremony by the town Totem. Jason could now see the town, and he almost glowed with the hum of his own animal spirit.

"He's got the slightest hint of Ac-taw, but it's there," Rachel had confided days ago. "Probably why he and your sister are such a sound match."

“Dammit, this thing itches.” Ty fiddled with the collar of his sport coat and sat with the congregation as the preacher began the vows. He plucked a toy syringe from under the back of his collar and swore under his breath. He tossed it behind him.

Monty whispered, “Oooh, a needle. I feel faint.”

“Assholes.”

“Shh.” Grady chuckled and poked him in the back. “I can’t hear Reverend Rhodes, tough guy.”

“You mean you can’t focus on Gabby’s ass when I move just so,” Ty whispered back and scooted closer to Julia.

Gabby glowered at him over her shoulder before turning to face front, and even Meghan shot him a glare. Several muffled coughs behind them couldn’t hide the laughter.

Julia tried to contain her own mirth. Ever since Grady had seen Gabby turn, he hadn’t left her alone. He stalked her day and night. The one time Dean had even hinted he might want to visit with Gabby alone, Grady had nearly torn his head off. And to Gabby’s astonishment, the silver foxes suddenly wouldn’t leave her alone either. Apparently being a shifter with two animal spirits was a huge deal, contrary to what her aunt and uncle had always told them.

Which made it a good thing Julia and her family now lived on the Catamount Ranch away from town.

Life with the pride would take some getting used to, but Julia loved it there. The silver foxes hadn’t blinked when she had announced she and her sisters were leaving. Ty’s departure had been another matter. The entire clan had put up a fight, but even they realized how wrong it would be to separate mates.

It hadn’t surprised her to see their reaction to the announcement that Julia and her sisters were half cat, either. While Ty and Gerald had the right of it and many in the Silver Fox Clan didn’t care, too many still did. Her aunt and uncle had been ostracized—the best part about coming clean. They’d also made it quite clear they no longer considered Julia and her sisters family.

Still, nearly half the fox clan had gathered in the chapel and waited outside, showing their support for Meghan.

“That’ll be us, soon,” Ty murmured and kissed her ear. “When do you want to make our own announcement?” He rubbed her belly before she quickly brought his hand to her lap.

“Not yet. This is Meghan’s day. Stop it,” she hissed, torn between laughter and satisfaction. Her shifty fox had done his damndest to knock her up. By her calculations, he’d gotten her pregnant that first night in the cave, when she’d felt her soul join his.

“I hope it’s a girl. And I hope she looks just like you.” He kissed her cheek and promptly behaved himself.

The ceremony continued. At one point, the bride and groom knelt before the reverend to receive his official blessing. Enamored with the purity of the ceremony, it took Julia a few moments to realize the crowd was making noise.

A glance at Ty showed him fighting laughter.

“What’s going on?”

Ty nodded at Jason. “Look at his feet.”

On the soles of his shoes, someone had written in black marker, *Help Me*.

“No, it wasn’t me,” he said quickly. “Must have been Dean. That cat loves a joke.”

“That’s *your* handwriting, Tyler Jonathan Roderick. Living with Dean and Grady has dropped your maturity level to zero,” she hissed in a furious whisper. She glanced over her shoulder at Dean and then Grady, who tried unsuccessfully to hide a smile. “And you. I’m telling Meghan and *Gabby* this is all your fault.”

He bit his lip but didn’t stop grinning. “Spoilsport.”

Near them, Monty, Gerald and the rest of the Chastell pride made faces as they choked down their amusement.

Ty poked her arm. “Come on, Julia. Admit it. It’s funny.”

It was. But God forbid her sister catch wind of it. If anything, her tendency toward theatrics had only grown since leaving the Silver Fox Clan. As if knowing she had the freedom to now be herself pushed her into an almost obnoxious exhibitionist phase.

Meghan must have picked up on the murmurs in the crowd, for she craned her neck to see the soles of Jason’s shoes and swore.

“Meghan Easton!” Reverend Rhodes rolled his eyes. “Great Mother above, forgive this child.”

“*Help me?* Who did this?” she wailed, the silver fox not content to make it through to “I Do.”

Jason leaned close and whispered in her ear. Lo and behold, Julia’s sister quieted down and apologized for her outburst.

“I never would have believed it if I hadn’t seen it,” Ty said quietly, laughter in his voice.

“Believe it. It takes a special man to tame an Easton.”

“Don’t I know it.” He hugged her tight with his right arm over her shoulder and pushed his left hand past hers to rub her belly again.

Julia smiled and covered his hand with her own. “Yeah, you do.”

“That’s right. I do. You just remember to say those words next month and we’ll be fine.” He fingered the diamond on her finger. “My foxy lady. You’re all mine.”

About the Author

Marie Harte is an avid reader who loves all things paranormal and futuristic. Reading romances since she was twelve, she fell in love with the warmth of first passion and knew writing was her calling. Twenty-plus years later, the Marine Corps, a foray through Information Technology, a husband and four kids, and her dream has finally come true. Marie lives in Georgia with her family and loves hearing from readers. To read more about Marie, visit www.marieharte.com.

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Westlake Enterprises
To Hunt a Sainte

A Scorching Seduction
Enjoying the Show
Sins of Summer

He's enough to tempt a Sainte to sin.

To Hunt a Sainte

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Westlake Enterprises, Book 1

Telekinetic Alexandra Sainte is through serving time behind a desk at Buchanan Investigations. She's more than ready to prove she's capable of fieldwork, if only her uncle will give her the chance. Tired of waiting, she turns a sudden opportunity into something more.

Her unauthorized raid of a suspected kidnapper's office goes off without a hitch—mostly—but as she makes her escape, she sees a pair of golden eyes watching her every move. Eyes that spark erotic dreams of a dark stranger taking her in ways that make her blush.

There's a reason Hunter Greye can't take his gaze off the sticky-fingered woman he catches ruining his investigation. She fights like a warrior. She bears a striking resemblance to a string of kidnapping victims. And she stirs a wildness within him he thought he'd learned to control a long time ago. She's a dangerous distraction he can't afford.

Thrown together in an undercover operation to find the mastermind behind the kidnappings, Alex and Hunter fall in lust, in love, and in danger. Only by trusting each other can they save the girl...and each other.

Warning: Beware psychics with attitude, a killer red dress, a ruthless villain with an angel obsession, and rivals who can't figure out who's better on top.

Enjoy the following excerpt for To Hunt a Sainte:

Two days later, Hunter stood grimaced in front of a slate blue door and pounded again. He smelled lavender and clenched his jaw at the effort it took to focus on his present course of action. He knew the damned woman was home.

When no one answered after a few more minutes, he set to work. The lock proved no problem, her security alarm even less of one. He'd have a talk with her about that...*afterward*.

Hunter had tried, but he could no longer avoid the inevitable. This had to stop. He moved silently and swiftly through her open rooms, noting the tidiness of her apartment. Alexandra Sainte decorated sparsely but with a warmth that was inviting.

An eclectic mix of styles accented the cozy feel of a living room well used. A plush leather sofa and matching chair congregated around a teak coffee table covered with home design magazines and the occasional fitness rag. A few plants, all healthy and thriving, sat in her picture window, overlooking a common courtyard. The few bookcases along a far wall boasted an assortment of titles, none of which indicated her preference of reading material.

He entered her spotless kitchen. The counters appeared clean, as did her pristine white cabinets. The ceramic sink remained free of dirty dishes. Not even a speck of dirt in the drain. *Dear God, did anyone actually live here?* Then the scent of lavender hit him hard. Again. His pulse raced, his body tightened, and pure, sensual need spiked his blood.

Swearing under his breath, he continued his search for the feminine bane of his existence. He turned into a hallway off the living room and stilled. He could smell her there, could almost feel her delicate energy in the air.

Time to tie up a few loose ends.

Williams' crew had given up their efforts at discreet surveillance and tailed Alex outright. Tonight, Hunter decided to take care of watching over Ms. Sainte personally. Professionally. *Finally.*

The sound of water splashing drew him down the hallway and through an untidy bedroom—a surprise inconsistent with the rest of the house. He walked through the doorway into her bathroom and froze.

Even though he'd been expecting it, the vision of Alex covered in bubbles struck him with the force of a physical blow. Surrounded by lavender and warmed by the humidity in the intimate bathroom, Hunter was overwhelmed with a sudden need to touch her golden skin, wet and shining before him. Calling on every ounce of discipline he possessed, Hunter forced himself to remain still and studied the sleepy beauty he couldn't get out of his mind.

A man would have to be blind not to appreciate her looks—golden hair streaked with honey, exotically slanted eyes that hinted at mystery, and full lips promising everything a man might want. Her body curved in all the right places, yet had a toned toughness that told Hunter she wouldn't break, even under a bit of rough handling.

The thought aroused him into taking a step forward. Desire engulfed him, and he literally ached, needing to touch her, to be inside that glorious body and discover just what it was about her that captivated him. Only one woman had ever come this close to making him lose control, and look at how that had turned out.

Angered at reminders of the poor choices he'd once made, he locked down his traitorous body and forced himself to handle this—*her*.

"All right, Sainte. Enough is enough," he growled.

She shrieked in surprise and sloshed in the tub, allowing him glimpses of slick flesh while she tried to gain her feet. Forcing himself to ignore the impulse to reach out and touch, he handed her a towel.

She grabbed it from him and hastily wrapped it around herself. "What— Who—" She took a deep breath. "How the hell did you get in my apartment?"

He frowned. "You need to update your security. Pretty sad that I managed your locks in less than a minute."

Slicking her hair back, she regarded him with caution and kept a firm hand on the top of her towel.

He forced himself to look no lower than her chin. “We need to talk.”

“No shit.” Instead of the fear he assumed he’d face, the woman had the nerve to step out of the tub right in front of him. No more than three inches remained between him and her delectable body draped with a thin towel. “You can’t just barge into private property whenever you feel like it, Greye. Now get the hell out of my bathroom. Get the hell out of my apartment!”

“I don’t think you understand me, angel. *I’m* here to talk. All you need to do is listen.” He stepped closer and inhaled her scent—feminine, floral and damned arousing. Pressed so close, she had to notice his reaction. When her eyes widened, he gave her a grim smile and leaned closer, caught by her tremulous gaze. “I didn’t want to do it this way,” he said darkly. “But you keep playing your games.”

“Games?” she parroted, her gaze glued to his mouth.

Disturbingly pleased he wasn’t the only one affected, Hunter strove to focus on the topic at hand. “The coffee? The chocolate? The feel of your soft skin under my hands? Projecting your bullshit is only distracting me from the mission at hand.”

She blinked up at him. “What are you talking about?”

“You know.” He couldn’t help himself and latched onto the firm strength of her shoulders. His thumb brushed the side of her breast, and she gasped. “You’re a beautiful woman, and you know it. You don’t need to play games to get my attention. Just let me handle this job, and I’ll give you exactly what you’ve been asking for.”

Her apparent anger stirred him past reason. Alexandra Sainte in nothing but a towel was bad enough, but in a passionate temper, her energy seethed and drew him like a moth to flame.

“Why you arrogant—”

The little witch thought to challenge him even now? *The hell she did.*

He kissed past her denial, knowing she didn’t mean it. He could all but sense her arousal as it pulsed through him. Feminine need and anger warred until her rage surrendered to the attraction between them. Everything she felt, Hunter felt as well, until he regained control once more, taking charge of his emotions.

Love can be a force of nature.

Serengeti Lightning

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Serengeti Shifters, Book 3

Mara Leonard is through hitting the snooze button on her biological clock. The Three Rocks Pride schoolteacher is ready to get serious about starting a family, and she needs a serious man to make that happen.

Regrettably, that means crossing less-than-serious Michael Minor off her list of potential mates. Michael is impulsive and passionate, but his spontaneity leaks into shapeshifting whenever his emotions run high—a tendency he should have outgrown long ago. As a sex buddy, he's delicious. Daddy material? Disqualified.

Michael is blindsided by Mara's rejection. Nine years separate them, and his genetic malady means no one in the pride treats him as an adult. But if she thinks he'll simply slink away to lick his wounds while she steps into the arms of another man, she has seriously underestimated him.

The tricky part will be convincing his over-analytical lover that he's more than a disposable sex toy. That real bravery means tearing up her damn checklist and following her heart. And doing it without letting their explosive sexual chemistry expose the Pride's secrets to the outside world.

Warning: This book features break-up sex, make-up sex, a lioness who's a cougar and a hot young lion who's grown up in all the right ways. Note: All electrical shocks are purely metaphorical.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Serengeti Lightning:

He'd wanted tonight to be perfect. This date was his chance to prove he deserved her, to show they were more than just hot sex. He knew she didn't think he was steady enough to be her mate, but he'd hoped to prove her wrong tonight.

Instead, all he'd proven was that he hadn't changed at all.

His sister, Ava, would remind him it wasn't his fault. He couldn't help it. The pride doctor said Michael was missing a neural inhibitor that drew the line between animal and man.

The science was small comfort. He would never be worthy of the woman curled against his side. How long could he expect her to stay with someone who could never give her the stability she craved? One more month? Two? Then who would she run to?

Michael forced the thought of the man who would take his place out of his head. Jealousy was savage—more likely than any other emotion to bring on a shift. He needed to get her back to the ranch, back onto pride lands, where a loss of control wouldn't expose them all.

He started to set her away from him, preparing to load her into the front seat, but her scent curled around him. Michael froze in place, his hands tight on her. He barely managed to keep his claws from snapping out.

Intermingled with the sweet twist of jasmine was the sinuous spice of lust. He could taste her desire on the air. While he'd been contemplating his sabotage of their relationship, Mara had apparently been thinking more much luscious thoughts. *Naughty girl.*

"Michael?" She spoke softly, a whisper on the warm spring breeze, but he felt that sigh of sound like a fist around his cock.

She slipped between him and the SUV, rubbing her body against his front every inch of the way.

Over the last few months, they'd learned one another's wants and needs. At first, they'd both assumed they would eventually grow tired of each other, but familiarity had only intensified each experience. They'd learned to play to their personal vices. He knew exactly how to touch her to get her wet in a heartbeat. And she knew he went hard at just the idea of pinning her to things—walls, doors, slippery shower tiles. He couldn't seem to get enough of crowding her against firm surfaces until she had no choice but to yield her softness to him.

Michael leaned into her, looming over her and pressing her back against the door until he heard the telltale catch in her breath. She loved this too. Mara may be dominant, but she almost never wanted to be on top. She wanted the man who would push her until she gave in, trusting her pleasure to his strength. She wanted *him*.

Now if only he could convince her their compatibility didn't end at the bedroom door.

Heavy-lidded eyes beckoned him. "Your wildness makes me feel wild," she purred.

Michael hesitated. Mara was never reckless. She reasoned things out and made the good decision, every time. So there was absolutely no explanation for her current behavior.

He had calmed. He was ready to take her home. All she had to do was hop in the car and drive back to the safety of the ranch. So why was she inciting him?

She urged him forward and he followed her lead. He bore her back against the metal wall of the SUV until the vehicle rocked slightly. She seemed to bask in the warmth of his body, drawing him tighter against her, if that was even possible. A small, sinful curve of a smile flashed out around her mouth.

Was she thinking what he was thinking? If he took her here, against the Cherokee, would they tip it? He knew he shouldn't want to try, but was captivated by the image teasing his thoughts. When she bit her lip, he wanted to bite it for her then suck that plump curve into his mouth.

"We should go." His voice was as rough as the gravel beneath their feet, but he kept his hands gentle as they stroked down her sides, over the flare of her hips, pausing above the hem of her skirt.

They *should* go. He should back away. He could yank up that little skirt, wrap those long legs around his hips and fuck her senseless just as soon as they were back on pride land. A fucking parking lot, no

matter how late it was, no matter how deep the shadows, was no place for this kind of game. He gripped her hips, fully intending to step away, but Mara—never, ever reckless Mara—forced his hand.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pushed up onto her toes and captured his mouth in a ravenous, open-mouthed kiss. She begged him with her mouth, drawing him into her madness with each longing pull of her lips and strong sweep of her tongue. Or was it his madness she was surrendering to? Right now, he didn't know or care. Her willing heat fried his last working brain cells and he fell into instinct and need.

Michael took command of the kiss. He sucked that luscious lip and gently scraped his teeth across it. His hands fisted in her skirt, jerking the stretchy fabric up, and Mara sighed into his mouth. God, he loved the noises she made, the little murmurs and sighs, not quite caught in her throat. She was musical in her passion, an instrument his fingers loved to pluck and strum.

The skin of her thighs was satin beneath his fingers. He wrapped his hands around the backs of her thighs. His fingertips brushed against her heat and he hissed out a curse.

She wasn't wearing panties. And she was dripping already. His slightest touch called forth another rush of moisture. Her need hit his nostrils, fogging his already blurry thoughts.

With one swift pull, he lifted her. Her legs wrapped snugly around his hips. He notched his denim-covered erection against her pussy, but he didn't push like he wanted to, concerned about the rough fabric against her sensitive flesh. He shouldn't have worried. Mara ground herself on him, tearing her lips away from his to gasp out his name.

"Easy," he murmured into the hair at her temple, barely recognizing his own voice. He slid his hand between them and slicked a finger through her folds. The touch was designed to be more soothing than arousing. He wanted to wind her up a little tighter before he let her take off.

Being needed isn't half as desirable as being wanted.

Undertow

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Building Sanctuary, Book 2

Victor left behind a life of crime to focus on a new vision—helping his alpha build an island sanctuary for werewolves. Harsh experiences prepared him for the hardships involved, except when it comes to dealing with the young female refugees of the brutal Boston pack—especially Simone, who rouses his inner wolf like no other. A woman he must resist, or risk becoming just the latest man to make demands on her.

Born to wealth and privilege, Simone lost everything when she fell for the seductive whispers of the textile heir who turned her. Once adrift, now she is fired by a new sense of purpose—the chance to broker peace between werewolves and European wizards. Yet even as Europe beckons, her instincts—the same ones that led to trouble before—keep drawing her back to Victor.

During a sailing trip to the mainland for supplies, Victor finds it impossible to hold himself aloof from the warm, engaging Simone. And when a winter storm traps them together during a full moon, she breaks through his walls so easily and completely, the question is no longer how he'll stay away, but how he'll let her go.

Warning: This novella contains werewolves engaged in such improbable (but legal) activities as lobster fishing and sailing during nor'easters. The breaking and entering and instinct-driven sex on every surface in someone else's summer cottage is a little more criminal.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Undertow:

Shifting back to his human form too soon would leave him feral and edgy, but staying a wolf too long would exhaust her. After a few hours, Victor began to herd her back in the direction of the cabin, willing to deal with his own discomfort to spare hers.

She caught on, but stopped short with a yip, and he had to nudge her on before she moved again. She paused again as soon as they cleared the trees by the cabin, watching him carefully.

He huffed and nipped at her flank, and she danced away and bounded to the door. He'd propped it open before shifting, so she had only to push it wide and run inside.

Magic rippled through the air as he ran in, and he found her already kneeling by the banked fire, her pale skin glinting in the dim light. "We'll have to stir this up."

Victor nudged the door shut and let her see to the fire. She had the advantage now. Freed from the call of the moon, she wouldn't fall victim to it again unless fear or pain brought the wolf to the surface.

He had a harder battle to fight. The moon hung heavy overhead and dug claws deep into his soul. The wolf struggled, demanding another chance to run and revel, to be free and wild.

Long minutes passed before he knelt trembling on the floor, sides heaving with rough pants.

“You didn’t have to come back in,” she murmured. “You could stay out. I’ll be fine.”

“So will I.” *Eventually*. “I wanted to come with you.”

The flames jumped and crackled as the fresh logs caught, and Simone stood slowly. “Can I help?”

She was naked. Beautiful. His to take. Even with pain lingering in his body, his cock stiffened. “That depends. Do you still want me?”

She tilted her head, and a coppery curl fell over her cheek. “I can’t remember a time when I didn’t want you.”

The answer was everything he needed. He rocked to his feet and crossed the space between them, stopping a foot away to admire the wicked curves of her body. Full breasts, flared hips, soft, pale skin... “You’re so beautiful.”

She closed some of the distance, her fingertips skimming his arms as her gaze drifted down his body. “So are you.”

He had to make it worth the wait. He had to make up for every moment of pain he’d caused her, erase it all and leave pleasure in its place. The bed was close enough to the fire to benefit from its warmth, so he swept her up into his arms and carried her to the rumpled blankets.

When he laid her on the bed, Simone bit her lip and held out her arms. “Seems silly to be nervous, but I am.”

Victor had no idea if Simone had taken a lover after Edwin, and had no intention of bringing the bastard up now. Instead he slid onto the bed, into her arms, and kissed her softly. “Nothing to be nervous about, darling.”

“It’s easy for you.” She wrapped her hands around him and pulled him closer. “Every time you kiss me, I turn to mush.”

“Just because I’m getting harder instead of softer doesn’t mean you’re not turning me to mush.”

Some of the nervousness faded from her smile, and she teased one hand down his side. “An interesting point. One I’ll have to bear in mind.”

He would kiss her first, he decided. Kiss her until she’d forgotten what nerves were, then trace every inch of her with his tongue. She deserved a slow seduction. Worship. He’d claim her by pleasing her.

Her mouth opened under his, soft and needy, and she made quiet noises of pleasure. Before long, her body arched to his, hot and seeking.

The feel of her soft skin under his fingers drove him half-mad. He spread his fingers wide on her abdomen, sweeping his thumb up and down until she nipped at his chin, then gave in and swept his hand up to cup her breast.

Her gasp echoed in the quiet of the room as her nipple hardened under his palm. “Yes.”

“You like this?” He teased his thumb over her nipple and delighted in the play of pleasure across her face. “Would you like my tongue? My teeth?”

Her breath caught, and she slipped her own hand to her other breast and echoed his movements. “Both.”

So he gave her both, teasing licks giving way to soft nips as his fingers traced her hip and her waist and the soft curve of her belly—anywhere but the beckoning heat between her thighs.

As Simone’s pleasure grew, so did her confidence. She smiled wickedly and rubbed her thigh against his erection. “Can I touch you?”

He couldn’t deny her anything with that light filling her eyes. “Any damn place you want.”

Her hand skimmed his stomach and his hip. “Here?”

If she wrapped her fingers around his dick, he’d explode. It might be worth it. “*Anywhere.*”

“Anywhere,” she echoed softly, the back of her hand grazing his hard flesh. “It’s been a long time, Victor.”

An answer to the question he hadn’t asked, and all the more reason to take things slowly. She’d tamed the feral edge of the wolf with her first hesitant smile, and it made it easy to roll onto his back. He tugged at her hand, pulling it up against his chest. “All the time in the world to get it right.”

She sat up, kneeling over his thigh. “You won’t hurt me.”

The fact that it was almost a question made him want to hurt *someone*, but he refused to bring anger to bed with them, no matter its object. “Not in a thousand years.”

Simone released a soft breath, one he doubted she knew she’d been holding, and bent over him until her lips met his bare shoulder.

It felt good—it felt fucking *fantastic*, but lying passively was its own sort of torture. He let himself thread his fingers loosely through her hair but didn’t try to guide her. Instead he channeled the need trembling inside him into words. “I’m going to spend hours touching you. So many places I want to kiss.”

“Here?” She kissed the center of his chest, then lower. “Or here?”

He tightened his fingers in her hair and lifted her head, giving her a deadly serious look. “I’ll let you lick my cock like an ice cream cone if that’s what you want, but you look me in the eye first and tell me *you* want to.”

Again, that gentle smile. “I wouldn’t if I didn’t want to, but I do. I want to taste you.”

Christ, he really *was* going to come like an overeager boy. And he didn’t care, as long as she let him keep touching her. “Do I get to return the favor?”

She laughed and nibbled at his stomach. “Absolutely.”

He was tempted—more than tempted—to drag her hips around and show her just what he could do with his tongue. Let her ride his mouth while she went down on him, see who lost it first. Tempting—but he didn't want any distractions when he made her come the first time. Not for him, and not for her.

Simone stroked his cock, lightly at first and then harder, her eyes locked with his. "I like the way you look at me."

"How am I looking at you?" It came out as a growl, but she didn't seem to mind.

"As if there's no doubt at all," she whispered. "Like you *want* me." She touched her tongue to the head of his cock, licking delicately.

No power in hell or on earth could have kept his hips from jerking up toward the heat of her mouth. "Like I'm imagining how good you'll look riding me?"

Her blue eyes darkened with passion. "Like you can't wait to sink into me."

"I can't." Victor drove his teeth into his lower lip to keep rougher words from tumbling out. He wanted to fuck her with his tongue until she was limp and trembling. Slide into her cunt before she finished coming. Watch her face when she realized she was *his*.

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