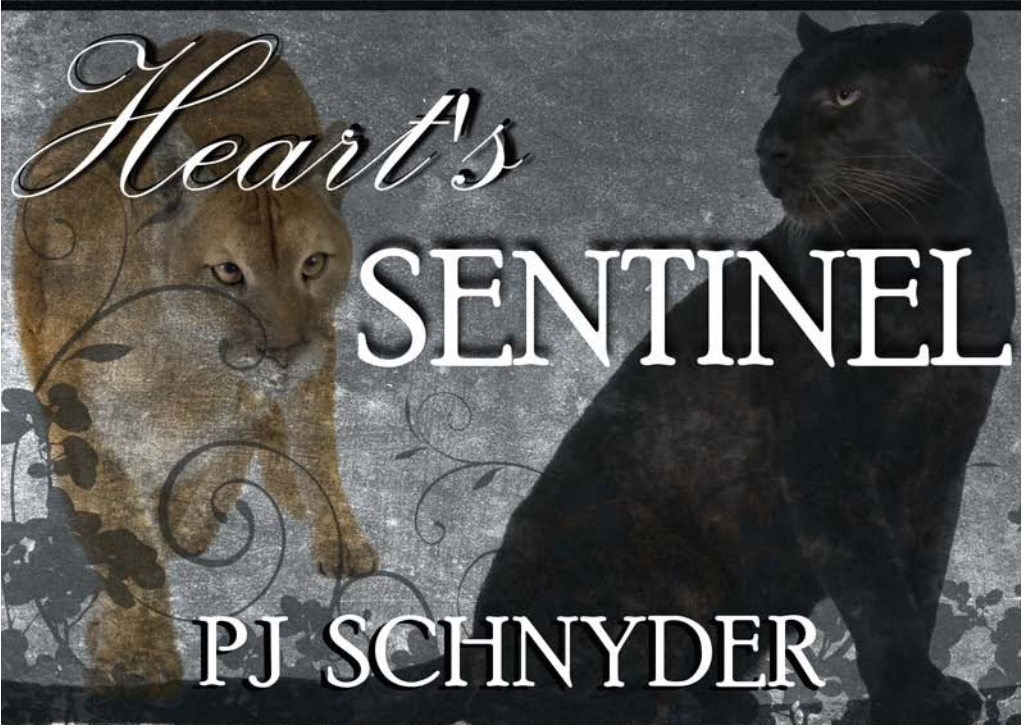


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Heart's Sentinel

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# *Heart's Sentinel*

*Book One of Terra's Guardians*

*by PJ Schnyder*

# *DEDICATION*

“for Ariya, Helen and Julie”

## Chapter 1

Adam knew every jaguar in River Gap Pride, and the woman who walked through the door wasn't one of them. He'd have remembered her sweet face framed in shoulder length hair, so dark a brown it shone black indoors. She must be new in town, come to stay in pride territory.

Pausing in the entryway to the dojo, her dark chocolate eyes scanned the foyer. When he approached, she tensed as if poised to bolt, but squared her shoulders and faced him anyway. Used to taming wild things, her response didn't bother him.

He gave her his friendliest smile. "Hi there, here for classes?"

People didn't get wilder than shapeshifters, and a fellow shifter stood before him. His inner beast growled, her scent exciting things deep inside his core. And yet, she had a newness about her, an awkwardness he associated with teens growing into their maturing bodies, even though she moved with more grace than any human.

"Yes." Her answer came in a quiet, wary voice. "I was interested in beginner martial arts classes." The melodic timbre sent shivers down his spine. "I spoke to Jacob. He told me my father and I would be expected."

With those words, Adam knew her. His beast surged inside his skin, drowning him in the need to protect.

And, she needed protection. It was why she'd come to River Gap Pride.

An older man stepped in behind her, bearing a strong family resemblance, his dark skin weathered brown as opposed to her golden tan. His hand, worn with honest work and slightly wrinkled with age, came to rest on her shoulder. He looked around the school, nodding to himself in response to some inner dialogue. The girl remained motionless under the man's touch, watching Adam, and it seemed her dark gaze saw right through to the violence just under his surface.

Adam struggled to control it, knowing she had every right to caution. "Is this your father?"

She gave a slow nod. Adam focused on the way the silken ends of her hair brushed against the corner of her mouth. His beast, redirected, wondered if her hair felt as soft

as it looked. He clamped down on his reactions, wondering why meeting one girl could throw his control off so badly. He didn't have time for it. She needed his protection from the bastard who had put the bruised look in her eyes, the reason she'd come here in the first place.

"Nick Sunton." Her father held out a hand, shifting Adam's attention to him, and Adam shook it without hesitation. For a human, the older man gripped not only firmly, but strong.

He nodded. "I'm Adam, an instructor here at the school."

"You look young to be an instructor." Not a challenge but a straightforward statement of fact.

Adam grinned. He already liked the old man. Nick approached with no nonsense and got direct to the point, dominant for a human. "I grew up in town, taking classes here. It was a natural progression, becoming an instructor. I'm the youngest, but I know everything we have to teach."

Nick grunted. Whether in acceptance or a dismissal, Adam couldn't be sure.

The young woman glanced at her father for a long moment and then introduced herself, her voice still full of caution. "I'm Mackenzie."

She gave him an equally firm handshake, but he couldn't ignore the fine tremor running through her arm as she forced herself to grasp his hand. He released her as soon as she began to withdraw. His inner cat raged, wanting to find the person who'd brutalized her and do the monster mortal damage.

Instead, he forced a cheerful smile, tucking away his ferocity with the ease of long practice. "Why don't we step into the office for more privacy?"

Wariness never left her eyes, but she followed her father into the office at Adam's direction. Adam gave her space as he followed them in, not wanting to make her fight the natural reluctance to let another predator behind her. If she had been born a shapeshifter, and not made, she might not have let him behind her at all.

Mackenzie told herself a fully grown, adult woman shouldn't have problems simply walking into an office. But then, most women she knew wouldn't have a natural-born predator walking in behind them. Hell, most women she knew wouldn't have minded

this particular man walking behind them, in front of them or anywhere nearby. He looked absolutely delicious in all sorts of ways.

Problem, right there. Mackenzie had been one of those women in the past—someone incredibly attracted to the dangerous charisma of a male shapeshifter. She'd fallen for it, head over heels, and drank in the wonderful sensuality one shifter in particular exuded like cologne. She'd reveled in the intensity of his attention until it burned her—nearly to death. Dangerous sensuality had turned to obsessive intensity back then, terrorizing her days and nights. Mackenzie remembered moving through every day, constantly aware she could turn any moment, anywhere, and her stalker would be there, without a sound or warning of any kind.

As Adam stepped in behind her, she balled her hands into fists to prevent herself from bolting back out the door, while her heart rate sped up with building anxiety. She blinked away the darkness closing over her eyes and forced her frozen lungs to take one slow breath at a time.

*No.*

Mackenzie forced herself to breathe past the panic attack.

*He's not here.*

Forcing her hands open at her sides, she turned with slow deliberation and settled in one of the chairs facing the desk. Willing her tensed muscles to relax one at a time, she leaned into the comfortable softness of the leather.

*This is safe territory and he is not the man who attacked me.*

Mackenzie set her jaw and looked directly into Adam's face, forcing herself to see *him*, see the differences between his face and the face taking center stage in her nightmares. Light eyes the color of honey, an open expression, and a strong jaw line shaded by a hint of stubble saved him from boyish abandon. When he smiled, a lopsided grin made her want to smile in return. The hint of wildness in his eyes, and the way he held himself spoke of the predator within, but somehow he'd taken most of the ferocity she'd felt from him earlier and hidden it away somewhere.

He did a good job with the reassuring, cheerful act. Mackenzie knew better. She'd seen the predator rise up in his eyes when he'd realized her identity. Between one breath and the next, he'd been bigger than life, filling the foyer with the promise of violence.

The only reason she hadn't retreated, right then and there, was because somehow she'd known his rage had been directed someplace else. And when he'd focused on her, instead of being further incited to violence, he'd calmed.

*Everything is different.*

She had to believe. She had to know, not only hope, shapeshifters differed from each other every bit as much as humans. Not every shapeshifter twisted lives like the monster who haunted her.

She'd come looking for a new life and a new start. She would *not* let the nightmare hold her back.

Adam paused in the doorway, giving her time to decide to sit. When he stepped inside, he left plenty of room to get back out the door if she decided she couldn't handle the enclosed space.

Her fear hung in the room, a sharp scent making his inner beast buck at the reins of his control. Her heart raced, a staccato beat to his shifter hearing, and he wanted to find and annihilate the cause of her terror. But he couldn't, because the most direct source of her fear at the moment was himself.

And, looking away from her wasn't an option, even if it helped. Something within him needed to watch, be aware of every nuance of her body language.

The bulky sweatshirt she wore couldn't hide her generous curves. She had the face of an innocent, delicately sculpted and youthful, but her eyes were old, shadowed though her age seemed fluid, shifting with every expression until he couldn't pin it down.

When she sat, obviously making an effort to relax into one of the chairs, he rounded the desk, keeping his movements clear so she could read his intent. Her father settled into a second chair. Giving them both another smile, he called up the files his boss, Jacob, had left behind on the slim comp-screen.

"We were told a new shapeshifter would be arriving." He mentally kicked himself for not having recognized her immediately. Her eyes, haunted as they were, should have told him before she ever had to mention Jacob. The owner of the martial arts school would've cuffed Adam upside the head had he been around to see Adam drop the ball.



But Jacob was away on a remote mission for the pride. Adam had been left in charge of the school, so he'd make it up to her. "We didn't know your age or gender. Our liaison from the human police didn't give us much in the way of detail, only a summary stating you were systematically stalked and then Changed against your will."

"Privacy is a big thing in the city." She almost sounded casual, but not quite. Those deep brown eyes remained dilated and a muscle tensed along the fine line of her jaw. "Most of u..most humans would press charges for a breach in privacy."

"And, most humans don't live outside the cities." Adam knew part of the answer to his next question, but there seemed to be more than the obvious need for protection from her stalker. "Why did you choose to come here?"

She hesitated. "Nothing moves right anymore."

"Okay." He watched her patiently. His inner cat knew how to wait.

"I'm not safe around humans," said Mackenzie finally, her voice flat, "but I need to learn to move again." Once she started, the words tumbled out and her pitch wavered. "I need to figure out all these sights and sounds and smells, the rush of feelings and the press of something new inside my head. I need to figure out my body again." Her voice broke as she came to a rushing finish. "I need to be me again, but I can't, so I need to learn to be something, somebody, else." She paused, took another measured breath as she reached for control. Her face turned cold and blank with her next words. "I need to learn to protect other people from me. I also need to learn to protect myself."

Adam nodded, growing more impressed by the minute with the sheer will contained in her petite body. Afraid of what she'd become, of what she could do to those around her. He knew what it felt like. Resolve solidified in his mind as he committed himself to help her move forward. She'd been given sanctuary by the pride, and the pride took care of those they made their own.

"The blended classes will give you an introduction to mixed martial arts. We cover several basic styles. The classes are a good introduction and they'll help you achieve your goals." He kept his words in a matter-of-fact tone to ease away the stillness lingering after what she had said.

Mackenzie nodded. Relief eased her expression, a minute relaxation of tiny muscles at her brows and around her mouth.

"It is important you understand," he said with a quiet intensity. It meant a great deal that she believe him, but he didn't want to take the time to figure out why. "No one here will force you to do anything against your will."

No one would force her here.

Mackenzie blinked away the memory as it washed across her sight, the intense look of love and madness in pitch black eyes before *he* reached out and clawed her. She tried not to hear crooned words of encouragement as he ripped her apart until her body failed, too weak to fight the Change.

"No." She lifted her hands to clench her upper arms.

Shapeshifters couldn't pass on their ability as easily as the ancient legends indicated. A single bite or claw wouldn't pass the magic to a human. No. Her stalker had ravaged Mackenzie to within a breath of her life to Change her from human to shapeshifter like him. And because she'd survived, he would be coming back to take what he'd created. She knew it, the certainty resonating through her bones, slightly out of tune, setting her teeth on edge.

"Mackenzie?" Adam, his voice full of confidence, called her back from the memory. "This pride will protect you."

She didn't know how well the pride could protect her, but they'd offered her sanctuary. "Are you sure?" She eased the grip on her arms and clutched the armrests instead.

"Yes." He quickly added, "You can make friends here too. We can help you build a new life for yourself, if you want."

Though the fierceness in his eyes had startled her when he'd first realized who she was, studying his friendly face now, she calmed a little. Her heart eased with reassurance, instead of the ever present fear she'd thought she'd have to learn to live with for the rest of her days. If the pride had many more men like Adam, maybe they could protect her. Maybe she could make friends. She had to start there.

His smile caught hold of her, the idea of his arms around her, strong and secure, protecting. And that took her by surprise, too. It had been some time, with the therapists

helping her work through most of the trauma of her attack, but it surprised her to be so aware of a man again, at least, so soon. Instead of being afraid, she embraced it, taking it as a big step in healing the damage done to her soul.

Her father reached out to pat her hand gently and she uncurled her fingers from the armrest.

"You can always come home, too." her father said. "Once you learn what you wanted to come here to learn."

She found a smile for him, turning her hand to carefully close around his. With her new strength, she'd almost crushed his hand the first time he'd given her the familiar comfort. Now she didn't dare squeeze his hand back at all, not until she learned to control the new and unfamiliar power in her muscles. Without doing so, she could hurt the people she loved most. And she didn't want them to suffer more pain than what it must have cost them to watch helplessly as she became something the doctors couldn't cure.

Time to move forward and learn to be the new Mackenzie.

"Mac," she said, raising her chin and meeting Adam's concerned eyes. "Most people call me Mac."

The corner of Adam's mouth twitched and mischief twinkled in his amber eyes, "We already have a Mack in the school. It could get confusing."

Mackenzie started to reply but he raised a hand to stop her. "No, no. Mac's fine. We'll come up with a way to tell you apart."

Considering his grin, he planned to have fun with it. The mood in the room shifted and Mackenzie realized she'd relaxed again, at least a bit.

Obviously, Adam had been watching for it. The mischief in his eyes sparked brighter as he spoke in an upbeat tone, "We'll take things a step at a time. Designing your program depends on you, Mac." Adam smiled. "Maybe we'll call you Big Mac. Let's get you started."

As Adam escorted Mackenzie and her father out of the office, they found the other instructors playing a game with the children to close out the class.

She stopped short in the doorway, fear rising up in a sharp spike of panic.

Every shapeshifter in the room caught the scent and turned towards her. The children stilled and the instructors edged forward a bit. *A bit* pushed her over an edge and the stranger inside of her took hold to challenge them all.

“Easy there,” Adam murmured. He stepped slowly to her side.

Swallowing hard, she fought to pull her heartbeat under control. Darkness had fallen outside while they'd been in the office. The school's main classroom, with a wall covered in huge mirrors, reminded her of her old dance studio. With the dark outdoors and the bright light inside, the windows acted almost as another set of mirrors. The trees beyond were spectral ghosts behind the lighted reflections of the students. She kept expecting to see a face through the glass. A face always staring in at her from the night, if she ever dared to look out a window.

A whimper clawed at her constricting throat. Every breath echoed harsh and hollow in her ears. Her attacker hadn't only savaged her, he'd stalked for a long time before he'd changed her. And for a short time before the waking nightmare, she'd dated him. Even with all the therapy, some things only faded with time.

A small movement to her side caught her eye. Adam, she realized, gesturing to one of the other instructors. They'd subtly moved to cover the children, putting themselves in her line of sight.

They were handling a situation, guarding against the danger she posed to the students, with her fear nearly out of control. Tears welled up, hot and stinging.

She looked at Adam, but the instructor didn't seem angry, his face still clear and pleasant, his gentle mouth curved in a small smile. Those kind eyes held sympathy and patience as he stood by her side.

Her father stirred behind her, only then catching the undercurrents in the room. “What's wrong?”

She steadied herself, anchored by her instructor's amber gaze, “Not much, Dad. I, uh, had a bad minute there, but I'm okay now.”

Her father mussed her hair as the class resumed its game. Everything seemed to move forward as if the panic attack never happened. Adam stayed by her side, probably as much for her reassurance as to be assured she wouldn't have another bad reaction.

"It takes some getting used to," he assured her. "Living with so many people who can know so much about what you are and what you think based on scent. Take things in your own time, at your own pace, and we'll be here to help you through the rough spots."

"I'm sorry." She tasted bitterness as she said it.

"No harm done," he answered her with a reassuring, gentle pat to the shoulder. "And you kept control. Very good for someone so new to being a shifter. Seriously."

The adults formed a large circle with the children in the middle. They threw a huge air-filled ball, as large as an adult, back and forth around the circle as the children dodged and laughed.

She found herself calming as she watched the children relax into play. They truly showed no harm from her earlier disruption.

"Even in training, jaguars like to play." Adam's words were light, making her turn to look up into those eyes, suddenly twinkling with mischief.

She began to reply, but a metallic flash caught her eye. She turned in time to see something huge crash through the window.

"Down!" Adam's voice snapped and Mackenzie ducked low in automatic response. He crouched protectively over her, his hand pushed on her back while her father's shoulder pressed against hers. Chaos and the frightened screams of children deafened her. Fear rose up in a choking wave, but it was the children who called to her, the scent of their own fear that cleared her vision. They scattered left and right as something, someone, crashed around the dojo.

Peering around the shelter of Adam's torso, she saw a man with some sort of jet pack strapped to his back. He struggled with a control band attached to his wrist as twin jets on the back of the pack fired randomly, slamming him into the walls, the floor, the ceiling.

Adam cursed. "Stay here."

He'd given an order, and she felt the power of it in a way she had never experienced before. He rushed forward with several other instructors to get the jet pack under control, but it proved too unpredictable, throwing them off and slamming them into walls as it continued to jerk free and yank its operator around like a rag doll. Two more men leaped in through the window, obviously in pursuit, and joined the instructors.

A few children crouched against a nearby wall near Mackenzie and her father. Eyes wide with terror, they clamped their little hands around their ears. As the chaos continued, their frightened screams caught at her, triggering an instinct deep inside her. One small girl looked directly into her eyes and lightning streaked through Mackenzie.

The man with the jet pack spun then, headed towards the children. They saw it coming, voices frozen and their little bodies paralyzed. She moved, her fear gone, only the memory of the little girl's blue eyes caught in her mind.

Crashing into the children, she wrapped her arms around them as best she could and shoved all three sideways. As they hit the floor, she braced her arms, trying not to crush them, while behind them, the jet pack slammed into the wall where they'd been a second earlier. She lay on top of them, hoping it wouldn't turn in their direction again.

But Adam appeared suddenly, pinning the jet pack down sideways as another instructor fumbled with the controls. The man strapped into the jet pack cursed over the cacophony in the room. "The toggle switch, gotta hit the button and the toggle at the same time." Adam reached for some other control panel and deactivated it.

The abrupt silence echoed in the dojo. The sound of the air intakes on the jet pack cut off, leaving only the quiet sobs of children and the harsh breathing of the men.

Levering herself up, she looked down at the children. "Are any of you hurt?"

Three pairs of wide eyes looked up at her. The blue-eyed girl started to speak, but her lower lip trembled and then she lunged, wrapping her little arms around Mackenzie's waist. Hot tears seeped through her shirt, and she patted the child's head awkwardly.

"Is anyone hurt?" Stepping to her side, Adam repeated the question, and Mackenzie felt something tight inside her chest relax at his arrival. How long had it been since any man's presence made her feel better?

"I don't think so." she answered. While scared and shaken, none of the kids had visible injuries although the little girl in Mackenzie's arms wouldn't let go. "I'm a tad tied up at the moment though."

He checked her over from head to toe before raising his eyes to Mackenzie's. Heat washed through her, burning away the jagged edges of fear. "You just about gave me a heart attack, saving them." He glanced at the child and then focused on her again.

"Thank you."

She dropped her gaze, a flush rising in her cheeks. Instead of answering him, she murmured to the little girl. "It's okay now. You're safe."

Another instructor hurried over and gathered up the children, taking the child from her and carrying her out of the dojo to be checked over by a medical team. Adam turned to talk to some of the men who'd come in after the runaway jet pack. Mackenzie's father strode to her, taking her by the chin and turning her face left and right.

"You're scratched." Unhappy and shaken, her father scowled, but pride shone in his eyes. "You're healing right away, though." He paused, and then wrapped his arms around her. "This place was supposed to be safe." She sensed the anger building in him and smelled the change on his skin as his arms tightened around her.

"An accident, Mr. Sunton." Adam returned, his hands held out in apology. "They were testing the thing and somehow it got out of control."

"That's it? Things like that can just happen?"

"It's not likely these things happen all the time, Dad, this had to be a freak occurrence." Mackenzie did her best to soothe herself as well as her father. "We should be glad no one got hurt."

Despite the scowl on her father's face, the emotion cracked his voice. "I can't see you hurt again."

Mackenzie hugged him back carefully. The attack hadn't only hurt her but had damaged her entire family. Giving him a minute, she kissed his cheek and carefully extracted herself from his arms.

Looking up, she saw Adam eyeing her, checking her for injuries. She stood and held out her arms. "See? Everything moves. I'm not hurt."

Her father stood, keeping his peace. She knew him. He'd probably talk to her about it again later, once they were alone.

Adam gave her a lopsided grin, lighting up the room in her eyes, and her heart jumped a beat. His glance dropped to the floor. "Yup. You're fine. The floor needs a little repair though." He nodded to the dents in the padded floor where her hands had planted on landing.

She'd shredded the padding—at some point her claws must have come out. Panic seized her, her stomach knotting. "I could have hurt the children."

"But you didn't," he said firmly, and reached out to touch her arm to bring her attention back to him. "You acted quickly, and you planted your hands so you wouldn't hurt them. Considering the situation, it's amazing you could think so fast."

The approval in his voice calmed her, and she glanced around the room rather than up into his eyes again. In scant minutes, the incident had trashed the room, shattered mirrors and glass, dented walls, and ripped padded floors. The little damage she'd done appeared miniscule in comparison.

Her eyes fell on the jet pack as several men carefully extracted the man strapped into it. "Is he okay? What is that?"

Adam nodded towards the group. "He's fine, beat up but otherwise okay. He might have a broken an arm and leg from getting smacked around. The medical team is seeing to him now. They're good at what they do. Best we can do is stay out of the way." He seemed concerned, but his advice made sense. "The jet pack, it's something new."

"New?" Mackenzie cocked her head sideways, too keyed up to settle, with adrenaline coursing through her blood.

He measured his response. "There's a situation out here, for all of the prides and packs. You were supposed to be assigned a Sentinel, a sort of buddy, and he would have told you as part of your orientation."

"But you're going to tell me now." She didn't make it a question. If a situation existed, she didn't want to be in the dark.

His lips twisted in a grimace. "Well, he was the Sentinel assigned to you. I'm guessing we're going to need to get you someone else, because even a shapeshifter isn't going to heal from those injuries any time soon."

She folded her arms, waiting. The smile fell away from his face, the predator there, under the surface.

"There are hunters out there." Adam bit out each word. "Not normal hunters. These things hunt shapeshifters and take their skins as trophies. Their technology is way too advanced to be ours, and we think they're hunting humans in the cities, too. The jet pack is from a hunter captured by a neighboring pack of shapeshifter wolves a week ago. My pride brother was on the team analyzing the thing to see how it works."



She dropped her arms in surprise as she processed the wealth of information he'd dumped on her. Well, she'd asked for it.

"You've got the short version." He turned to herd her towards the door. "You can ask questions later, once we get you checked over."

He hustled her and her father out to the waiting medical people. She expected a swarm of uniformed technicians but instead found normal-looking people with concerned expressions, checking her over with instruments taken from portable medical kits.

"We're on alert, obviously, and accidents happen." Adam explained as she sat patiently through the series of tests. "So we keep portable medical kits stashed at every public gathering location and in caches throughout the territory. You'll need to learn to recognize where they are in case you're first on site to an accident, before the trained medical team arrives."

Professional, capable and efficient, but not suited up in anonymous isolations suits and helmets. They comforted her so much more than the impersonal medical teams she remembered treating her in the city after her attack. In moments, they pronounced her in good condition and handed her back over to Adam's care rather than be carted off to wait in a sterile emergency room for further checks. Much better, and no less thorough, she thought.

Adam brought her and her father a cup of steaming broth. "Something to help calm your nerves."

She bit her lip to hide a smile as her father took the cup from Adam's hand to give to her. Adam appeared to take the small protective gesture in stride, and simply handed him the second cup once she had hers.

"It's later." Mackenzie blew on her broth, and looked up at Adam over the rim of her cup. "Can I ask questions?"

He motioned to a nearby bench, encouraging them to sit. Her father sat next to her and preempted the questions with a demand of his own. "I want to know my daughter will be safe here."

"This is not a normal day." Adam gestured at the broken window of the dojo.

"I hope not." She wasn't sure how anyone could survive so much excitement on a daily basis.

"The hunters are a real threat," he admitted. "But all the prides and packs are at risk. With your situation, we were going to wait until you had time to settle in before talking about it with you. You had enough to worry about without the added stress."

"What are they?"

He shook his head. "We're not sure yet. We know they're humanoid, and they can speak standard language. Their technology is similar to what we know, but very advanced. The team was testing out the jet pack to get an idea of the controls. There are other groups testing other equipment like the communications technology and body armor."

"The jet pack looked to be built for a man." She considered the mystery, turning the memory over in her head like a puzzle box.

"The hunters stand, and bleed like we do. We learned as much from last week's attack." His lip lifted into a snarl. "What we don't know is where they come from or why they hunt us."

"Walk like us, talk like us, and you're not sure they aren't some faction of us?" Awful idea, but the Cataclysmic Wars had been proof of the atrocity mankind could commit.

"They look different. Pale, long in the arms and legs with oblong skulls and huge eyes. They don't smell like humans or shapeshifters, either. They smell almost metallic. Some of the teams are considering them alien even. We don't know enough." He bit out the words, but she didn't feel the usual zing of fear. His anger, however real, was clearly directed at the hunters and the discussion.

"How is anyone safe out here?" her father asked. By the tone of his voice, she knew he ached to take her back home.

"The cities are vulnerable too, Mr. Sunton." Adam pointed out without hesitation. "The human police haven't made it public because of the panic it could cause in such a big populace concentrated in a small area. The risk is the same, and we are better able to help Mackenzie get the control she needs."

Her father fell silent, considering.

When she didn't say anything, Adam continued. "It's been a hell of an evening. You should go back to the guest house and settle down. The only thing you need to let sink in right now is we've got the territory on alert to be sure everyone in the pride is safe, including you. No one goes anywhere alone, and you will always have an escort outside of town. With the amount of security we've set up to handle these hunters, your stalker won't have a chance in hell of getting anywhere near you."

A shocked laugh popped out of her mouth. Adam paused to look at her, concern evident in his pinched expression. She shook her head and waved her hand in a weak gesture. "I didn't expect reassurance to come out of this sort of thing."

He ran a hand through his thick hair, ducking his head sheepishly. "When things smooth out, I promise I'll talk it through with you in a sensible way."

"No." She glanced at her father and then back to Adam. "We're fine. I'll go and process someplace quiet. We'll go back to the guest house."

Gravity dragged at her limbs and her hands shook in waves of fine tremors. Fatigue kicked in as the adrenaline finally drained out of her system.

"The pride will probably assign you another buddy tonight. In fact, new protection for you takes highest priority." He paused to exchange a few words with a passing instructor before adding, "Why don't I swing by in the morning to introduce you to whoever it is?"

He planned to find out exactly which Sentinel would be assigned to guard Mackenzie and make sure his pride mate knew to treat her with care. Although she'd held up amazingly well under the shock of the accident this evening, her face became paler with every moment.

She tipped her head to the side as she seemed to consider his offer before she said, "We haven't had time to meet many people yet. An intro would be ...easier."

The echoes of damage done to her were there for him to see, as much as she presented the impression she had accepted what had happened to her. She put up a good front. But her actions in the emergency told them all clearly what she was made of. Given the time, she would be an incredible woman.

"No problem, I'll be over first thing in the morning, okay?" he assured her.

Her father nodded, his concern still evident, but she gave Adam another sweet smile before standing up. As she stepped away from the bench, Nick paused and turned to Adam, giving him another nod and a gruff, "Thank you."

Adam nodded in return and wondered if her father would thank him for thinking about what he wanted to do to those lips of hers.

Nope. Not a chance.

## Chapter 2

*Words crooned in her ear as she struggled to see through the pitch black filling her vision. He loved her. He would make her His, in every way. With sluggish arms and legs, she struggled, held down by some great weight. Her nostrils filled with the smell of her sweat, her tears, and her blood.*

*Agony ripped through her and Changed her.*

Mackenzie bolted upright, blinking away tears. Struggling to steady herself, she looked around the unfamiliar room. She almost sobbed as her eyes drank in the light, realizing day had come and the time for nightmares had passed.

The sun had barely risen above the high tree tops of the forest when she threw on sweats to answer the brisk knock at the door of the guest house a few minutes later. She paused briefly as she passed a mirror in the hallway and noticed the state of her hair. Grumbling, she grabbed her father's cap and jammed it over her head, tucking her hair in the way she used to as a kid.

As she opened the door, Adam stood there looking bright and cheerful.

“Morning.” Hearty and far too awake, his voice pricked at her sleep-fogged mind. She mumbled a response and looked around him.

He grinned, amusement lighting amber eyes. “No one out here but me.”

It took another long minute to process the unexpected visit and then she realized she'd left him standing in the doorway waiting for an invitation to enter. Okay, not so swift in the morning.

Stepping back, she cleared her voice and attempted a more civil greeting. “Come inside? Dad's in the shower. We thought you'd be a little later than this.”

“We wake early out here. But I brought something to make up for it.”

She followed him to the kitchen, her interest perking as a mouthwatering aroma rose out of the box he opened.

“The café in town makes the best coffee in the territory.” He raised an eyebrow as he gave her a look from head to toe. “I'm guessing caffeine is a good idea. You don't seem to be a morning person.”

As if it took a genius to notice. She started to retort then thought better of it as he lifted out cream and sugar as well as the large covered cups. “Coffee first, witty repartee later.”

Adam grinned. “Cream or sugar?”

“Both.”

“Light and sweet.” He obliged her by adding them to one of the cups. “Like you, Kitten.”

Startled, she didn't answer him as she carefully took the still steaming cup from his hands. One thing had only gotten better with her Change. Her favorite treats smelled even more delicious. Focusing on the wonderful aroma wafting from the cup, she tried not to analyze the unexpected fluttering sensation the nickname caused in her chest.

“Thanks,” she murmured. One sip and she almost moaned as the wonderfully complex flavor rolled through her, rich and creamy sweet with enough bitterness to accent the spicy character of the coffee. “You're right, this coffee is the best.”

“Don't mention it.”

On the other side of the counter, Adam surreptitiously adjusted his growing interest in watching Mackenzie enjoy her coffee. Even in sweats, she presented a tantalizing combination of adorably cute, and luscious curves. A few strands of dark silk hair had escaped the cap, and fell against the curve of her cheek. No one had a right to look so good first thing in the morning. And the way she enjoyed her coffee, Adam wanted to nip at her plump lower lip, and tease her into letting him taste the coffee directly from her mouth.

Luckily, or maybe not, her father emerged from the hallway dressed, and looking barely awake. Ruthlessly, Adam shoved his response deep inside. Oblivious to his reaction, she kept sipping at her coffee. Considering how much he'd be seeing her in the near future, he needed to get himself under control.

"Coffee, Dad." She spoke without taking her attention from her own cup. Nick grunted and nodded to Adam.

"Cream or sugar?" asked Adam.

"Black." Nick's voice came out gravelly, and the creases across his forehead seemed even deeper.

Adam handed him a cup, and hid another grin as Nick leaned against the counter. Apparently, neither the man nor his daughter talked much in the morning.

"It's not like we're not happy to see you," said Mackenzie, sitting with one leg tucked under her, "but I thought you were going to be bringing company."

Adam revised his observation. Apparently, the talking flowed easier after coffee.

"Funny, that." He took another sip before continuing. "Turns out I'll be your own personal Sentinel for a while."

"Come again?" Big brown eyes widened and blinked, once, twice.

"My pride brother is going to be laid up for a week or so." Adam shrugged. "Since you got to know me yesterday, we figured you wouldn't mind having me as a buddy."

"A buddy." Mackenzie said it slowly, as if she didn't understand the meaning, which she probably didn't, not the way the pride used the buddy system.

"You'll need a buddy for a couple of reasons." Adam explained, holding up a few fingers and ticking them off as he gave her reasons. "You need someone capable of helping you control your beast until you can learn to do it on your own. You also need someone to explain pride social behavior to you, especially since you're single and definitely interesting to any male in his right mind. I'll be there to warn the interested males away until you know enough to make a choice and communicate it properly."

Nick scowled, crossing his arms. "Tell them to move along or introduce themselves to family first."

Adam paused, eyeing her father warily. With a look as deadly as Nick's, he wondered how she had ever dated at all.

When he didn't say anything more, Adam continued in a slightly more serious tone.

"Finally, the attack may have happened in the city, under human police jurisdiction, but you were attacked by a shapeshifter who stalked you first."

Mackenzie nodded, her face carefully blank. "I knew him, dated him for a few weeks, before...it happened."

She didn't say the rest, but Adam had access to her full file because he'd been assigned as her Sentinel. She'd come through counseling well, managing the trauma better than other victims in the past. The attack had been purely physical, not sexual, but Adam still intended to keep her interactions with adult males to a minimum until she demonstrated she could handle close contact.

"It's the responsibility of his pride to make him accountable for what he's done to you." Adam carefully kept his expression and tone neutral. If she knew the anger he felt for the heinous crime against her, she would be afraid of more than her attacker. "Your stalker hasn't been caught yet, but he will be. Until he is, I'll be guarding you specifically. It's what Sentinels do."

"Guard duty?" Her tone held a slight bitterness, but she didn't say more.

Nick scowled. "The police set guards on our doors. Useless. More than useless. They made it clear they had better things to be doing."

She spoke up as her father started to choke up with his anger. "I'd rather not have you stuck with me because you drew the short straw."

Adam shook his head. "In the pride there are Enforcers and Sentinels. They both protect the pride, but in different ways." She watched him with half-hooded eyes. He didn't know how to read the look, but she was listening so he continued. "The Enforcers are forward units who travel beyond pride territory to deal with threats before they reach the pride. Sentinels like me stay in the territory providing direct protection. You would have been assigned a Sentinel no matter what, but they figured since Jake still isn't back yet and your original buddy is laid up, I could teach you and provide effective coverage at the same time. It makes sense."

"You've protected others before?"

He studied her youthful face. She had her head cocked to the side, considering him. The childlike stance summoned memories of a girl curled in the corner of a room, splattered in blood and staring at him, fearing him. Ruthlessly he shut them away as he answered Mackenzie. "Yes, I have."



Too serious, he needed to back away from the past. She had him pinned under a strangely intense gaze. Like the eyes of the girl in his memories, hers held shadows of evils she never should have seen. The darkness squelched Adam's attraction to her for the time being, waking his protective nature instead. She wasn't ready for an adult male's interest. Of course, his inner jaguar tried to insist he could be interested and protect her at the same time.

“What are the chances the bastard will find her here?” Mackenzie's father cut into his jumbled thoughts. Adam shrugged off the random musings and refocused on the conversation and Nick's question.

“Dad...” She began, but her voice trailed off uncertainly.

“Possible, but not likely.” Adam answered them both with confidence and maybe a touch of feline arrogance. “There are Enforcers already out looking for him before he can reach River Gap territory. I'm here because I'll already be teaching you. We like to be thorough.”

Mackenzie let his words sink in, giving her a sense of comfort. She almost thanked him, but then Adam continued with a bright question. “So, who's ready for walkies?”

Mackenzie's teeth snapped shut. No one should be so bright and cheerful, especially not in the morning. What happened to the intense man she'd been studying only moments before? Besides, what man took impromptu little walkies? Who said *walkies* anyway?

“Pardon?” She gave him a chance to revise his invitation.

“Hiking.” Amber eyes lit with merriment. “No time like the present for you to get to know the pride territory. Besides, you need to learn to smell other things besides coffee.”

He won a chuckle out of her father. Mackenzie glared at the betrayal, but Nick only shrugged. He obviously liked Adam.

“Go learn, Bonk-head.” Her father tapped the rim of her cap. “I'll call your mother and finish packing.”

He had to return home on the evening train. He'd spent most of his vacation days with Mackenzie while she recovered from her injuries and then while she hid inside her

home, too afraid to leave. His work wouldn't wait much longer. Besides, it strained both of them, knowing he had even a little fear of what she could do.

They needed space, and she needed to deal with what she'd become.

Mackenzie nodded and stood. "Okay, Dad."

It took effort to leave the relative safety of the guest house. She refused to be afraid to walk outside anymore. Or at least, she would face the daylight. The dark of night would be goal for another day.

"We'll only be a few hours," said Adam, "Back in time to take you both over to lunch."

An hour later found them in the midst of deep woods. Sunlight slanted through the tree branches in shimmering golden curtains. Birds called out and squirrels played hide and seek amongst the leaves and trunks. Darkness became a memory. Instead, rocks and roots provided an entirely different challenge.

"Tell me again why the great outdoors is so great," panted Mackenzie as she struggled to keep up the pace Adam set for her. Somehow she'd thought being a shifter had her in pretty good shape. After recovering from the Change, she'd become significantly stronger and faster than any human in optimal condition. Obviously, his conditioning topped her.

"The wild wasn't shaped by the hand of man." He pointed out. "It is what it is and you fit into it or you don't. That kind of simple acceptance is nice to find once in a while."

"I thought the Conservation brought back most of the wilderness areas, recovered after the Cataclysmic Wars and all the systematic damage done before them."

"You know some history, but do you really know what the Conservation is?"

"I know the Conservation is the only central governing entity for the shape-shifter groups. I'm not real clear as to how it governs or how they established it, but it is a governing body of people. Doesn't it mean what is wild now was 'shaped by man' back then?" She dusted off her pants and pulled her hair up and away from her neck to let the air cool her skin.

His nostrils flared, catching a scent on the breeze. "The Conservation put the land and water off limits so nature could reclaim lost territory. Work crews cleared out rubble

and used technology to neutralize pollution. Representatives helped reintroduce a few species native to the area to help re-establish healthy ecosystems, but the wilderness reformed basically as it would have naturally. No shaping, but maybe some judicious coaxing.”

“Ah. All this accomplished in only a couple hundred years.” She sniffed at the air experimentally, following his lead.

“It takes a surprisingly short period of time for the chaos of nature to reassert itself and it does it in an ordered way, really, if you know how to look at it.” Picking up a dead twig, he snapped it between his fingers. Seemingly insignificant, the movement subtly demonstrated his strength, greater than anyone’s she’d ever met. What she’d originally thought to be a brittle twig turned out to be a branch thicker than a cigar.

“Okay, so the great outdoors is pretty amazing.” She decided not to watch Adam move around the way he did, so easily in the woods. All power and muscle, he embodied the perfect specimen of attractive male. Yum. Sweaty and tired, she didn't feel anywhere near his match. And, male companionship fell pretty low on her priority list for the near future. Keeping in mind her last choice in men, she made a rule to herself to avoid any at all until she felt whole again. “Why are we rushing around so much? I thought we were taking a short hike? This is more like heavy duty hiking up and down hills and over logs...and there were those rocks back there you swear don't make a mountain, but you could have fooled me.”

He gave her his gorgeous smile again with a hint of wicked in those amber eyes. Possibly, she'd make an exception to her rule about companionship. “Sorry, Kitten, but I needed to know what you could do before I start training you. I need to know where to start.”

She let her face darken into a scowl, but his amusement only increased. “So, this was all a physical fitness test?”

“Basically, yeah.”

“Ever heard of a structured set of tests instead of roaming all over the back end of nowhere?” She blew out an exasperated huff, blowing a few stray hairs up and off her forehead.

“Structured is for city living.” Adam swept his arm out to indicate the woods around him. “Your body is more challenged by taking on what comes.”

“Fine.” She relented. It hadn't been frivolous or a direct deception. “How'd I do?”

Adam shrugged. “There's no passing grade out here. I got an idea of what you can do and what you can't. That's what matters.”

“And up next?”

“I like the way you're constantly up for the next challenge.” He paused and gave her an insufferable grin. He even had the nerve to take in a huge breath of air, expanding his chest until she could see the cords of muscle ripple under the stretched fabric of his shirt. “You need to learn to be at home out here. So, relax and enjoy the walk back. It'll be a real walk this time. Fresh air is good for you and the great outdoors is something the new part of you will crave.”

Doubtful, she paused on the trail and took in a slow breath. Scents flooded through her and she struggled to identify them all.

“Close your eyes.” His voice compelled her, guiding her. “It'll help you focus on the one sense if you close off one of the others for a bit.”

Mackenzie squashed the flutter in her chest in reaction to his deeper tone, but did as instructed. Every once in a while, his lighter, cheerful façade broke and she couldn't help but respond to the more serious side of him.

The next breath cleared more easily, carrying the clean scent of trees, earthy leaves and maybe something minty. Each of the scents had a different character and some of them held sun-touched warmth while others gave her impressions of cool, moist shade. Adam's spicy musk teased at her nose and the air currents against her face made her aware of where he stood, within arm's reach.

Like the coffee he brought, he had a rich laugh and an elusive bitterness to compliment his spicy scent. But, she couldn't quite pin down the bitterness. He covered it too well with the happy-go-lucky attitude, and at some point in the morning she figured she must have imagined it.

“Is there mint nearby?” She decided to focus on the elusive scent of herb. She'd rather munch rabbit food than tell him he smelled good.

“Actually, yeah.” His voice filled with approval, and maybe a little amusement. Getting to recognize the tones would take more time. “You'll find it here and there in patches.”

“Mint is good in tea to settle your stomach.” She stretched her mouth in a quiet smile as she opened her eyes slowly.

“Got a tummy ache, Kitten?”

She shrugged. “Nah, Mom always said so.”

He made a play on words as he turned to keep walking. “So...sew buttons?”

“Enough with the evil puns,” she snapped, even her inner cat annoyed with the hokey turn of phrase. He always seemed to have a pun or a joke ready, and she'd known him for less than a full day.

He turned to her and shook his head in mock disapproval. “Tsk. So easy to get a rise out of you.”

“Better than Mr. Happy Happy Joy Joy.” Irritation rushed through her, tightening her chest and raising fine hairs on the back of her neck. Lifting her lips away from her teeth, she growled at him, the rumble beginning in her chest and following her words out. “Not everything is all jokes and puns and easy, laid back... *walkies*.”

“For someone so determined to be positive and accepting of what's happened to her, you hang on to the dark side of things and stay grumpy.” He shot back easily, his voice still light.

Her fingers curled into claws, and she fisted them in an effort to control herself. The anger built and her cat snarled inside her head. “There's no choice but to move forward. I won't wallow in pitying myself. I won't let him win.”

She glared at him, knowing her pupils were changing shape as her vision sharpened. She bit out her next words in a flash of insight. “I won't walk around all cheerful pretending I don't have issues to face.”

His face grew serious, light amber eyes darkening to a burnished gold. “Issues. There are issues it takes a lifetime to protect people from.”

Again, she calmed at the serious tone of his voice. The bitterness had risen in his voice again, the taste of a memory. She hadn't expected to hit so close to home with her jab.

In a perverse way, she liked him better serious. But it didn't mean she wanted to cause him pain. She leaned her rump against a nearby rock, letting her hands fall open against her lap. Looking down at them, she saw human hands with only red skin at her fingertips to hint at the claws pricking beneath.

She softened her next words. "Some people don't want protection. How can you protect people from who you are? What you are? And still like yourself?"

"*You* learn how to control your beast." He had his jovial tone back as quickly as it'd gone. "You are seriously too easy to tease, Kitten."

"I used to take jokes better," she admitted it to him, and to herself. When had she let him give her a nickname? She didn't know, but somehow it was the only thing he seemed to say all the time without tweaking her temper. And, her temper rose past her control all the time.

"Shifters have a wider range of extremes." He bent for a moment to snag a few leaves close to the ground. Handing her a sprig of mint, he continued walking. "We see more clearly, farther, and don't need as much light. We hear sounds humans can't hear and at greater distances. We smell much more than feeble human noses. We're faster and more powerful. So, it makes sense that we feel more strongly."

"We're a moody bunch, huh?" She tried for levity, pushing away from the rock and walking a few feet to one side.

Half a smile tugged at his mouth at her try. "We swing pretty drastically from mood to mood sometimes. It depends on the circumstance. That's why you have a Sentinel to guard you. I'll help you manage the swings until you can control yourself on your own."

He paused then continued with a hint of sympathy. "I know it's rough, Kitten, but it's easier if you stay away from brooding. The lighter your mood, the easier your cat is to keep in check."

"So, why is it just getting angry?" She struggled to understand, frustrated with the emotions seething inside her. "Why am I not blindingly happy like you?"

A rueful chuckle met her question. "Ah well, the rage comes easiest. Your cat feels rage for a lot of reasons. Think on it."

She nibbled on the mint, savoring the cool flavor as it spread across her tongue. She'd always associated rage with anger. When Adam prompted her, she realized there

were other reasons too, if she would admit them, reasons driving her to be grumpier than usual, even for morning.

"I'm afraid." Honest answer.

"So your cat rises to defend you," he nodded. "Any animal hurt or afraid will defend itself. Humans do it, too." A pause, then he added, "You're a strong girl—you're angry, too. Tell me about it."

Yeah, she was definitely angry. It had taken a long time to breathe past the fear and be strong enough to feel anger at what had happened. Now sometimes it rose up so fast she choked on it.

"Van did it without asking," she whispered, her voice trembling with the force of her rage as she spoke the name. She bit down on her lip, tasted blood.

"That's an understatement." The calm of Adam's voice washed over her, cooling the rage of her beast.

"He was seriously attractive," she admitted. "I loved the controlled energy Van had. He would be standing completely still, and you knew he could explode into movement faster than a thought. Like you." She glanced at Adam and shrugged. "I fell for him. When we started dating, he had all the right words to say to make me think we were dating like all the other couples I knew in the city. It didn't really click in my head, the difference in dating a shapeshifter. Not until he started to get obsessed."

Falling silent for a moment, she focused on breathing through the panic creeping up as she thought about it. She pushed on through her story, grateful he wasn't too close, listening without pressing. "Then it seemed as if anywhere I went, no matter where or what time it was or even who I spent time with, he would be there. He'd be looking in at me from a window, or leaning against a building across the street. He'd be there, and I knew I wouldn't have noticed him if he hadn't stepped out at just the right time to make sure only I saw him, and no one else did. I don't know why I kept dating him." She shook her head at the memory of her own stupidity. "When he decided to attack me, it was at the end of an incredibly romantic date. I thought he wanted to convince me not to end things. Instead, he decided to make sure I couldn't escape him."

Frustrated, she clenched her hands again, willing the trembling to stop as she struggled to keep the fear under control. Nearby, violence rose up and brushed against her senses, and somehow Adam's contained strength helped her find an anchor.

Van wasn't there and couldn't get to her. She had a Sentinel at her side.

It took a few more minutes, but both the panic attack and the memory released their hold on her. Standing there in the middle of a forest trail with Adam standing a few feet away, she felt more secure than the hours she'd spent curled up, hiding in her closet.

"Once you gain more control, you won't feel the need to defend yourself as much," he continued as if he had never exerted any power. "You'll start getting other mood swings which will be fairly entertaining."

Empty and wrung out, Mackenzie gave a shaky laugh. "Like?"

"Oh, I figure you'll give the single males in the pride a run for their money."

"No." Adamant, she glanced at Adam, a new worry streaking through her. Cats went into heat, didn't they? She couldn't ask.

But he anticipated her, looking way too amused. "You are one of the big cat species now, Kitten. You'll have your heats."

Cursing felt good, but a cold fear crawled its way inside her stomach. She didn't want to be driven to face the increased sexuality she'd been experiencing. She didn't want to be desperate for someone's touch, anyone's touch. She wanted to be able to choose.

"No worries." He picked up a few stones and tossed them one at a time, his entire body relaxed. "The pride healer, Chryssa, will keep you company for your first heat. She'll be able to take you away for a while so you don't do something you'll regret."

Well, a little comfort there. Despite her attraction to Adam and her growing comfort level with him, she felt hesitant to meet other males. One at a time was enough, especially if they were all as vitally male as he was.

She opened her mouth to say something, but hesitated. Suddenly, looking up at his face seemed dangerous.

"No, I'm looking forward to you exactly as you are." He tossed his last stone into the trees and dusted off his hands. "Cutting a swath through the boys without even noticing. Like last night."

She narrowed her eyes. "Boys?"



"Boys would be safer for you to interact with at first, less threatening, more straightforward." Pointing out the logic didn't make it any better. "Adults would be more subtle."

"And you'll find entertainment in watching?" It pricked her vanity he didn't seem interested in participating in the predicted shenanigans. She did have an ego, after all. And there he stood, framed in sunlight, without a single inkling of how he'd bruised it.

"As your guardian," He made each word deliberate and slow. "I'm obviously going to be an objective observer. You need someone to ask about social behavior for a while. At least until you feel comfortable."

"Uh huh." Crossing her arms, she seethed. Not only infuriatingly cheerful, he patronized her too. Maybe it was time to meet some other males after all, if only for better conversation. And she'd be damned if she'd be asking him questions about any sort of intimate...social behavior.

She strode off down the trail to work off some of her temper, scaring a few nearby squirrels up a tree as she stalked past. And pretended she couldn't hear his insufferable chuckle behind her, too.

A couple of hours later Mackenzie faced her first martial arts class. They had cleaned out the dojo, still holding classes despite the lack of mirrors and window. Adam stood in the center of the floor before a group of children, wrapping up a class as Mackenzie watched. Without her annoyance shading her vision, she got a better measure of him.

No doubt about it, he had the market cornered on hot.

Mackenzie couldn't help staring at those broad shoulders, the taper of his wide chest to his narrow hips. Her fingers itched to play with the close-cut dark hair at the back of his head. He seemed very approachable, and very pettable.

As if aware of her appraisal, Adam turned to wink at her. Blushing, she looked away. She knew next to nothing about shapeshifters, he'd made that point clear during their walk earlier. While she lived the life of a healthy young woman and had dated a few guys back in the city, she had no idea what could be accepted in shifter society. She had only ever dated one shifter.

She shivered. Her old life had been stripped away with agonizing deliberation and she hadn't been able to stop it. Van had destroyed her, remade her in his image. Now, human-turned-shapeshifter, a panther among leopards, she floundered to regain her footing.

Painfully aware she didn't know enough about shapeshifters, she faced a huge learning curve. They lived by a code of rules and ethics governing their volatile natures. She had to learn the code, or risk becoming a monster like the one who had created her.

“Is it interesting, Bonk-head?” Her father's question warmed the air with affection, settling her.

She nodded, without really considering the question or noticing the old nickname.

“Can I learn to live here, Dad?” she whispered, her mood turning dark.

She sensed rather than saw her father shrug beside her. “We'll let you watch and see what you feel. If you don't like it, you can come home.”

Humans didn't leave the cities often, preferring the shelter of towering structures as well as technological comforts and conveniences. Some shapeshifters came to the cities for higher education. A few humans left to live amongst them in the wilderness territories restored after the Cataclysmic Wars had destroyed most of the human population.

Mackenzie had never expected to be one of those few, but then she'd never expected to find herself no longer human. Something wild stirred inside her and her attraction for Adam flared up in an almost frightening way. Damn, she wasn't sure if it was cologne or his natural scent, but she couldn't help but remember he'd smelled really good too.

As she tried to follow her father to the chairs in the waiting area, she tripped over her own feet.

“One step at a time,” she grumbled to herself, “Figure out moving first. Figure out pheromones later.”

A few minutes passed and the children were let out of class. The tension inside her slowly released. She wouldn't accidentally hurt a child. And, though she didn't see the three she'd helped the day before, she'd worried all night about what could've happened if she'd made a mistake.

“Go on, Bonk-head.” Her father encouraged her with his gruff affection as other adults started warming up on the mats. “Go try out the class and see how you do. I’ll be right here.”

Her father's way had been to let her go and try, always there to catch her if she fell. Mackenzie picked a spot against a wall and started to stretch. The other adults glanced at her with curiosity, but everyone gave her space.

She’d only been stretching for a few minutes when Adam approached her and held out a pair of odd-looking gloves. Made of leather, they had no fingers and most of the palm had been left open. Padding covered only the knuckles, and a leather strap wrapped around the wrist.

“These are grappling gloves.” He slapped them together with a smile. “You should wear them to protect your hands during the drills.”

“Thank you.” She glanced up into those warm eyes again. They were edged in a ring of darker gold, and she wanted to reach out and touch the hair falling across them. Clearing her throat instead, she focused on the gloves. “Are they included in the gear provided with the classes?”

“Actually, these are new ones and you can pay for them after class.” He crouched down to her eye level so she could continue to stretch without craning her neck to look up at him. “The rest of the gear we supply, like protective pads and focus gloves, we supply. But you can't take them home.”

“Focus gloves?” Mackenzie hesitated. “I've never taken martial arts before, so...”

He lifted up his hands, well shaped and strong. She swallowed and blinked away an unbidden image of those hands doing naughty things. Instead, she tried to actually listen to what he said, though she did love what a pair of skilled hands could do.

“...catch your partner's punch,” he explained the focus gloves, “They provide a target and protect your hands from the impact at the same time.”

“Okay, so they're called focus gloves because your partner focuses their punch into the glove.” See? She'd been listening. Really.

He grinned. “Good enough. C'mon. For first time students, an instructor pairs with you one-on-one to help you get to know the flow of the class and the beginning moves. I'll be your partner.”

“Got it.” She kept her voice light as she responded, figuring it would be no hardship to be paired with him. And here, there were people as strong as or stronger than her. She wouldn't hurt someone by accident while she figured out how to control herself.

“The class always begins with warm ups, slowly moving through basic punches and kicks.” Adam noted Mackenzie had no trouble following the opening exercises in slow motion, watching him as he demonstrated and watching herself in what was left of the mirror to correct her own body position in comparison to his. She hesitated, yes, but learned fast.

He'd been monitoring her shifting moods as she watched the classes, getting to know the nuances of her expressions and body language. Aware of her body's response to him, by scent and the open honesty in her face, he planned to walk a fine line as they worked together moving forward.

Tough balance, when her attraction to him pleased him so much and the pragmatic side of him figured she'd be better off with other interactions.

“Why do you teach here?” she asked as the class split into pairs to begin more complex drills. The melodic lilt had come back to her voice as she relaxed into learning. Naturally curious, she made a good cat.

He grinned at her. “The dojo is one of the centers of the community. It's like being with family all the time.”

“So, you've always been here, in this pride?” She watched carefully as he demonstrated a move, but had no problems keeping up conversation. Multi-tasking came easily for her, too.

“I've visited a few others, when the wandering itch caught up with me as an adult, but I always come back. This pride is strong in family ties. Not every pride is.”

“You were born a shapeshifter?”

He nodded. “Most are. Very few are Changed, but we welcome them into the pride. They're given the chance to learn before they either stay or go their own way.”

He didn't mention what happened to the Changed if they couldn't learn control. Mackenzie would learn and live, he'd make sure of it.

“So everyone's used to new shifters?” She tugged on the tips of her hair as she thought on it. “The kids yesterday took it really well when I had my...moment, before the mass chaos broke loose with the runaway jet pack.”

He wanted to tug her hair too, see if he could spark her temper.

“They followed the instructor's lead,” he answered, without hesitation. “We're here to protect you all, even from each other. Accidents happen, tempers slip, especially amongst the kids and definitely amongst the juveniles. We're more than enough to contain you if you lose control of yourself.”

“That,” and her face held an odd mixture of relief and sadness, “is really good to know.”

Impressed, he watched her continue to move through the exercises he gave her. Still awkward, but given the chance to take it slowly, she exhibited a grace and a sense of balance beyond what could be attributed to being a shapeshifter. She took note of differences in body position and corrected herself in subtle ways. Patient and observant, she listened and learned with a maturity in the way she took constructive feedback at odds with the youth of her face.

Once they advanced into more drills, she took off the sweatshirt she seemed to always wear and tossed it to the side. No doubt about it, the maturity wasn't only in her behavior.

“Getting a little toasty over there?” It took effort to keep his eyes on her face, and he definitely knew other males in the class weren't. Generously curved, with a trim waist and fantastic legs, she danced on the balls of her feet. Even being near her got a reaction out of him, and he worked to hide it from her.

“Hey, you may be used to this, but I'm working pretty hard here.” She raised an eyebrow at him while she puffed faintly with the exertion.

Fascinated with her incredibly expressive face, he absorbed every new glimpse into her personality. Her expression became painfully vulnerable when she hesitated, uncertain or confused, the impression reinforced by the fear surrounding her. In an environment she perceived as safe, she became animated and lively, attentive during explanations and adorably pensive when she struggled to consider how to go about executing a move.

And, when she actually made a strike, her face became absolutely blank. A stone cold look settled over her eyes, empty of the vibrant life shining there a split second before. It set off alarms in him, because he knew he wore the same look at times. He knew what lay under the surface. That look had no business being on the face of a young woman given sanctuary by the Sentinels and Enforcers of River Gap Pride. Not ever.

So he joked. He made puns. He said anything to bring the life back into her eyes after she threw her punch or kick, even if it made her scrunch her cute face up in dismay.

“My sense of humor not your thing?” He stepped back as she tried to reset her stance after a correction. He’d let loose a particularly bad pun, considered it a skill.

She gave him a high roundhouse kick with a good amount of force behind it before answering. “Puns are okay sometimes. Yours are so painful they burn.”

He stumbled back a few steps, clutching his chest in mock drama. “Oh, she wounds me.”

She stuck her tongue out and blew a raspberry at him. He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from telling her what he wanted to do with her tongue. Instead, he decided to tease her a little more.

“What are you? Maybe seventeen?” he asked as he gave her a slow swing to evade. He exaggerated, but what woman didn't like to be taken for younger? “There's a waiver I should have had your father sign before you started the class.”

“Yeah, no.” Ducking easily, she came up quick with a responding jab. He corrected her hands so they were in a better position to guard her face. “Try adding about five years.”

“Seriously?” Even as he teased her, he admitted her sweet face would have fooled him if he hadn't already read her files and known some of her history. He enjoyed the way she drew her brows together in an irked expression as he continued to play dumb about her age. “Twenty-two? Seriously?”

It explained the level of maturity, though, and his inner cat's response to her. Normally, younger girls didn't attract him. Good to know they still didn't.

“What are you? Fifty?” Mackenzie growled. “So I've got a baby face. It's supposed to be a good thing for a lady.”

Something eased inside him, the tight hold he'd kept on his beast loosening a little. The baggy sweatshirt had made her look like a waif. Without it, well... she was all woman underneath.

"I don't know about any lady." He grinned as her dark eyes sparked with a little temper. He'd have to work on pricking it more often. When she got riled up a little, she forgot to be wary. "But this *gentleman* is a couple of years shy of thirty, a solid twenty-eight, thank you very much."

"A whole quarter of a century plus three. Charming."

"Prince-like, even."

Mackenzie groaned. "Not any Prince Charming I've read about, ever. You've got six years on me, tops."

"A lot of wisdom and maturity can be packed into those six years," he pointed out, puffing out his chest a little.

"Or a lot of hot air," she shot back, her chin lifting a little.

And both of them were posturing like children. Fantastic way to prove a point.

"Fine, Kitten," He held out his focus gloves to indicate a combo set of punches. The class had latched onto the Big Mac nickname, but he'd tossed it and given her one of his own. Kitten came more naturally, and served as a reminder that he was her protector. "You tell a joke then and change the subject."

She gave him the jab-cross-hook-cross combination he'd finished teaching her a moment before and spoke. "If a man is all alone in the woods..." She danced around, her weight forward on the balls of her feet, as he circled and held the gloves out for a front kick, "and there's no woman around to hear him..." She gave him the kick with a resounding thwack to the gloves. "Is he still wrong?"

"Ha!" A female instructor snickered, having overheard. "Always liked that one."

Adam scowled at his colleague and his spunky new student equally. Mackenzie blinked her big brown eyes then stuck out her tongue at him again. Somehow the childish gesture had a completely adult kind of effect on him. He didn't bite back his comment in time. "Better keep that in your head or someone will give you something else to do with it."

Those dark brown eyes widened even more, if they could, and she bit her plump lower lip for a second before her eyes sharpened with mischief. She snapped her teeth at him. "That's why you're supposed to be teaching me self defense."

Adam felt things down low tighten when she snapped her teeth. His cat liked the way she wasn't so damaged she couldn't play. Trying to hide his response from her became a challenge through the class, and he gave thanks she hadn't learned to interpret scents well enough to smell his arousal.

Of course, the rest of the class had no such problem. Luckily, the pride was close knit. No one would give him away to Mackenzie until she could figure it out for herself.

"So what did you think of the class?" He offered her a hand towel and a bottle of water as they walked over to where her father waited.

Her face flushed from exertion and her dark chocolate eyes sparkling from activity, she gave him a grimace. "Interesting. I kinda suck at it."

"Yeah." Nick rose from his seat on one of the chairs in the waiting area to give her a hug. Adam noticed her father moved slowly to give her time to prepare for the gesture. Humans moved slower than shifters, but not that slow. Adam guessed the family had suffered a lot of heartache watching what psychological damage had been done even after she had physically healed. Her father smiled at her, tender and affectionate. "But, not so bad. It's a new thing. You aren't supposed to be good at it right away. It'll give you something to work on. You like working on things."

Mackenzie smiled softly in response, patting at her neck with the hand towel.

Nick turned to Adam. "Are all the classes like today?"

Adam nodded confirmation. Her father loved her, but it obviously tortured the man to stand by and watch her struggle to rebuild herself. "Warm ups first and then moving through drills. There's always a couple of new drills and a review of drills the class already knows."

Nick grunted and nodded. "Any sparring?"

Adam noticed the man managed to convey a whole range of meaning with as little as a grunt and a nod, but he understood. Fresh from her ordeal, close contact engagement



would trigger worse memories in Mackenzie than the brief panic attacks he'd seen in the past day or so.

"Not in the blend classes." He answered honestly, making sure she'd know what might come later on down the road. "If Kitten here stays on for the more specialized classes, there could be some sparring, but only after a pretty good chunk of time. She'd have gained a lot of skill and confidence by then."

Nick considered for a moment, dipping his chin low and drawing his eyebrows together. After a moment, he nodded again, satisfied.

"Should we head back now?" Mackenzie lightly bumped her father's side with her shoulder, her hands on the towel draped around her neck.

An improvement. She hadn't been comfortable with small gestures the day before.

"It's about time." Nick agreed with his daughter, nudging her back with his shoulder. They stood like that often, shoulder to shoulder, leaning into each other.

It seemed to Adam they communicated much more than what they said. He felt a little left out, but before he could decide what to do about it, she turned back to him.

"I'd like to keep attending classes." Her smile shot a spear of light through his heart.

He returned the smile. "We'd be glad to have you. Next blended class is in two days. In another week or so, we should have the dojo put back together again properly. In the meantime, I'll meet up with you to show you around the town."

"Sounds good." Already looking outside, her sharp eyes scanned the area, as if looking for ghosts.

He fought the urge to offer to walk her home, but held his tongue. Her father could be there for her. In a short time, Nick would be going back to the city, and Adam wanted her to have as much time with him as she could. It would be better to let them go on their own.

Funny how he already looked forward to the next time he'd see her.

### Chapter 3

The taste of her blood lingered on his tongue and he knew he could find her.

Mackenzie was his. She didn't belong to humans anymore, and she would find no solace with the weak shifters who had dared to give her sanctuary. With the blood bond between them, she had no place on the planet to hide. Wherever she ran, he would find her.

Loneliness shrouded her heart, he sensed the way every beat echoed in empty space. Lonely and confused and waiting for him. All females played the game...*find me, catch me*. She tested his skill, his love, to see if he could come and claim her. She knew he loved her. After all, he had made her.

He would pass her test. A pride full of spotted weaklings barely presented a challenge.

Although pitiful as they might be, he knew the weak could still overcome a warrior if their numbers managed to overwhelm. He approached with caution, skirting the territory and making plans. Remaining hidden became child's play as he counted their sentries, timed their patrols. With his allies, infiltrating their land would pose no issue.

He had a few presents for his Mackenzie, and a few tricks to set her off balance so she would be grateful to fall into his arms.

When she realized she had no place to turn, she would come to him. After all, she was his.

## Chapter 4

“What is this place?”

Adam grinned as he watched her stare around with those large, liquid brown eyes framed in long, long lashes. Such an interesting mix, Mackenzie. One moment a cautious, serious girl having seen too much, suffered too much. The next moment, she approached life as new and curious as a kitten, ready to experience everything for the first time.

“The communal kitchen and store.” He headed for the food service counters. One served various tender cutlets grilled or breaded over rice, another offered sliced meats in sauces and yet another had various types of noodles in different types of savory broth. Each counter had a menu posted with clear pictures of the offerings. “The Sentinels and Enforcers are on duty in rotating shifts around the clock. We don’t always have time to cook but can always come here to eat or get something wrapped up to take back to our lairs if we don’t feel social. The food service is available at all hours, quickly served but not fast, if you get my meaning.”

“Sounds like you’re on the job all the time.” Nick watched all of the predators around him. Human, Nick seemed aware of his vulnerability. He hid it well, and no scent of fear gave him away, only caution. Since most humans either succumbed to fear or walked arrogantly without it, Adam decided Mackenzie’s father had wisdom to find a middle ground.

“We take the protection of the pride seriously. There’s full coverage around the clock, every day. Junior and retired soldiers supplement both Sentinels and Enforcers in every shift, too. There will always be someone ready to meet whatever comes up.”

“Good to know.” Nick gave the questions a rest for a while, his eyes on the shapeshifters around him, and on the way his daughter reacted to the surroundings.

“This is where the grocery store is, too?” Mackenzie craned her neck to look over at the half of the building stocked with groceries. The other half opened onto an area with tables and chairs set in groupings of two, four or eight. Around the perimeter of the seating area, counters provided food service.

"Like to cook?" asked Adam.

Nick snorted, one of those elusive smiles spreading across his face. In answer to Adam's questioning look, he gestured at the grocery area. "She's been cooking since childhood, for her brother and sister, too. Her mother and I work late."

She nodded slowly, a few strands of dark hair falling across her cheek. "I cook some. I'm not great, but I used to cook at home most nights. Mom and Dad work hard for us, so it's the least I could do."

Nick slipped an arm around her shoulders and gave her a brief squeeze, letting the solid contact settle her nerves. "Your cooking is great." He paused. "Can't cook for less than sixty people though, you're going to have a lot of leftovers around."

"Dad!"

Adam didn't miss the way her father had redirected her mood. He grinned. "Any of the juveniles would love to help you out with leftovers. You can do most of your grocery shopping here or have them run the groceries for you if you're cooking for them. There's also one or two specialty stores in town like the coffee shop and bakery."

"Mmm." Her attention focused on the food service counters. Several hours had passed since the coffee they'd shared that morning, and Adam knew she must be hungry.

"You hungry already?" Nick asked and Adam heard the worry in his voice. She'd probably been eating a lot more than she used to, something her father wouldn't understand.

"A shapeshifter burns calories at a higher rate than humans." Adam explained in a matter-of-fact tone, to reassure her father, and to warn her. "We eat often and in greater quantity. A hungry shapeshifter is bad news." And she wouldn't have known yet to eat enough to satisfy her hunger. The human doctors probably hadn't known the fact to tell her before she'd left the city. "Her appetite is a good sign, actually. Loss of appetite would have had me worried."

Mackenzie's father nodded, the tightness in his face clearing. Nick flattened his hand against her shoulder and gave her a gentle shove towards the food service counter. "We should get you fed, then."

As she approached, one of the juveniles straightened behind the counter. Adam hung back casually to see how she reacted to Liam.

“New to River Gap?” Liam gave her his friendliest tone. One of the older juveniles, on the brink of becoming recognized as a man in the pride, he stood an inch shy of six feet tall, a good six inches over Mackenzie’s petite stature. He gave her a slow, smooth smile with a twinkle in his dark blue eyes. Even though he had some filling out to do, Liam had popularity covered, with no lack of female company, and a lot of practice wooing shapeshifters and human girls alike.

She gave him a sweet, shy smile, nodded and then asked in a wry tone, “Is it so easy to tell?”

“We’re pretty close knit here in River Gap. Everybody knows everybody.” He shrugged, spreading his hands open in front of him. Adam didn't miss the way her eyes dropped to Liam's hands. “But we’re all friendly. What can I get you?”

“What’s good?” Mackenzie tilted her head to one side with an engaging look Adam found fascinating. Liam proved even more susceptible. Adam watched as the juvenile’s interest focused more tightly on her while he launched into a discussion of the dishes served at his counter, drawing out Mackenzie’s preferences. A good tactic, learning the tastes of a particular female, one Adam himself had taught the boy to help him in his romantic relations.

Watching them interact, Adam noticed an air of patience about her. She humored the juvenile. Even though Liam made his play for her interest, she definitely kept control of the conversation. She proved to be more than the boy could handle, and Adam was inordinately pleased.

Still, she had an open and inviting personality. Those eyes of hers sparked with life and her plump lips curved in a ready smile lighting her entire face. Something in the way she held herself, shoulders relaxed and head tilted to one side, disarmed him. She had a way of getting into a man’s comfort zone before he ever realized she was there. And once there, it was hard to imagine her not.

Resolutely, Adam buried the feelings he didn’t want to identify. She was his student and his charge. He’d decided to keep it simple. The last thing she needed from him was the pressure of his interest. A lighter set of encounters with juveniles like Liam would

ease her into life in the pride without the tension. Besides, she'd walked through the door only a day before.

"There's a bonfire tonight." Liam continued to coax her. "It's a good time. There's music and dancing, some stories by the fire. You should come."

Hesitation. "Oh, I don't know."

"Aw, come on." Liam gave her his best smile, one he used to melt even older women into his lap.

Mackenzie bit her lower lip as she considered. Adam sensed Liam's beast rising to the surface. Not that he blamed the boy. Mackenzie's lips were a temptation, sweetly curved, and a plump invitation for the kinds of kisses that could leave a man drowning.

"Maybe," she said finally, with a touch of reluctance.

But, Liam pounced on it like a surrender. "Then I'll look to see you there. Promise me a dance."

Adam bit back a growl. He wanted her to interact after all. He wasn't going to swat the boy for flirting. Liam gave her the normal give and take, ease of conversation Adam wanted to get her comfortable with amongst the shifters.

She only laughed and reasserted her earlier answer. "Maybe."

And, he'd be damned if he'd begrudge the boy for the brightness of the smile she gave Liam when he loaded a tray with her order. Adam even found it in him to pity the boy. Mackenzie had no idea how devastating her brilliant smile could be, walking away completely centered on her food as the juvenile wistfully watched her retreating figure.

Deliberately ordering from a different counter, Adam collected his meal. As he grabbed a pair of chopsticks, he paused and then took another pair. His student might benefit from another little lesson. Since the Cataclysmic Wars, the humans in the cities had focused a lot of their culinary practices on what had been considered Western style, using forks and knives. The shapeshifters had preserved many of the other cuisines and eating practices over the intervening time.

"Dig in." Adam encouraged her as he and Nick joined her at the table.

Adam watched Mackenzie grab up her fork in a flash and then catch herself. With an effort, she slowly took a bite of breaded pork cutlet and chewed.

He smiled in approval when she glanced up at him. Not all new shapeshifters could control the urge to devour. Fascinated by the way her cheeks flushed a dusky rose, his fingers itched to brush across the heated skin. Instead, he tilted his head to indicate how he held his hands and watched as she noticed he wasn't holding a fork. The pair of little sticks balanced in his hands.

"These are chopsticks," he said in answer to the adorable look of puzzlement in her face.

Mackenzie swallowed and cocked her head to one side quizzically, studying his hand with her intent stare. "You can eat with those?"

"They're a set of utensils used by some cultures in the old world." Adam waved the chopsticks to one side and then the other, suppressing a chuckle as her eyes followed his hand. "We find them useful because they're easy to carry and clean if we're away from town for a while. In a pinch, we can even whittle a pair easier than we can make forks or spoons. They take some skill and dexterity to use."

Full of curiosity, Mackenzie studied how his hand held the sticks and used them to pick up pieces of food or scoop up rice. Adam grinned. She looked like a kitten studying a piece of loose string. He resisted the urge to wiggle the chopsticks to see if she'd pounce and instead handed her the extra pair.

Teaching Mackenzie a new way to eat made lunch a positive experience, and a lot more interesting for Adam. The urge to fall on her meal and tear into it disappeared as the human and cat sides engaged. When she acted so cute, she made it easier for Adam to remember his role. He was her teacher, her guardian. End of story.

"Are you looking forward to the bonfire tonight?" Even to his own ears, Adam's cheerful voice sounded forced.

Mackenzie walked at his side, silent. The energy he associated with her every move had become muted.

"I think it would be a good idea for you to join us." He decided to press on as if her silence was normal. She had given in to a rush of vulnerable tears as she had seen Nick off at the train station. Even from a distance, Adam's sensitive shifter hearing had heard

the sobs. "We're celebrating the birth of a new child, and there will be a lot of other children and juveniles there."

"How would going be a good idea?" Her voice came across flat and devoid of interest, as if she didn't care about the answer. It had only taken a few minutes for her to regain the careful control she maintained in front of him and bottle up her sadness again, as if the torrent of fear and grief had never occurred, but a lifeless Mackenzie had been left behind.

"Those of us born shapeshifters learn from birth to be what we are," he said, encouraged when she responded at all. "It would do you some good to spend some time around the young children and juveniles to see what they see and how they experiment."

"You seem to like to toss me in with kids." The spark of temper flared.

He continued unphased, wondering if he could fan the spark a little. "You'll also get a good exposure to how we interact socially."

"Families," she began, hesitating and then trying again in a stubborn tone. "Families will be there."

"It's not healthy for a shapeshifter of your breed to be alone." He insisted. "You need exposure to others, a pride to socialize with and be near. You're a southern peninsula panther in your other form. Not so different from the River Gap Pride jaguars. It's another reason why the Conservation sent you here. The Conservation doesn't only see to the restoration of the wilderness. It sees to the well-being of the shapeshifters living in the wild. You need the interaction and the social contact a healthy pride can give you."

"I read up on my breed when they first told me they couldn't change me back." She told him, dragging her hand through her hair. "They're not even panthers, not the way I'd thought about them. Panthers, to me, were all black."

"A melanistic variant of jaguars or leopards." He confirmed, glad she'd done research at all. But then, he shouldn't have been surprised. Every action she'd made to date reflected her constructive and inquisitive nature.

"But southern peninsula panthers are a type of cougar, mountain lion." Shrugging, she dropped her hands to her sides. "I don't even understand why they're called panthers at all. They're usually tan or grey." Memory glazed her brown eyes, pupils dilating in response. "Van was grey."



“Cougars might not be jaguars, but they are big cats.” Adam stepped into her line of sight, bringing her back to the present conversation. “And you can find a place with this pride until you feel more comfortable with yourself, both as a human and a cat. Seeing the members of the pride in a relaxed atmosphere, like the bonfire, will be easier. I promise.”

“Even if families hurt right now.” The stubborn streak remained, but her voice dropped to a sullen mumble.

“I know you’re tired.” He understood, but he needed to get her around those who might give her the companionship to help her through her transition. With her father gone, she’d need contact from others.

Shapeshifters were tactile creatures, drawing comfort and balance from physical touch. Because of her trauma, Mackenzie shied away from touch, but her inner cat craved it. The conflict left her off center and more volatile.

The pride’s children would instinctively brush up against her, give her a chance to get to know them, and incidentally provide her cat with the contact she needed without any perceived threat an adult male like Adam might trigger.

But his beast ached to touch her, wanted to give her comfort. Giving in a little, he reached out to brush a strand of hair from her cheek. “But, it’s the way we heal, to be with our pride. The pride surrounds us, supports us. If you let us, we can do more than teach you, we can be there for you.”

Again the silence hung between them, but she gazed at him, waiting.

He tried for what he knew would get a response. “Maybe you’d prefer to sulk and hide in the guest house.”

Anger flashed in her eyes. Yep, he’d fanned the spark higher. “You sure I wouldn’t be a danger to the children if I did go?”

He grinned and pinched her chin in a lightning-quick move, not giving her the time to flinch or escape his hold. “Not with me there.” His pleasure increased even more as her temper sharpened enough to lighten those dark eyes to a cat’s gold. She didn’t try to step away from his touch. “Other Sentinels will be there, of course, so we’re more than enough to control you if necessary, but I’m betting you would hurt yourself before you hurt any of the kids.”

“That’s a comfort.” She bit out each word. He watched the telltale sign of her clenching and unclenching her fists, but then her body language changed completely. She stood a little taller, her shoulders back and relaxed. “I suppose I should be grateful you’ll be there at my side?”

“A trusty buddy doesn’t hurt.” His attention sharpened with the change.

“And I can trust you?” Her eyes had become unreadable, her constant movement suddenly stilled. In one moment, even if she didn’t know it, she became all cat and hunting—motionless as she waited for his answer.

“Besides, it will give you the opportunity to meet pride members without actually being the center of attention.” He let his hand fall away from her chin and resolutely backed away from her unspoken offer. “I’m still looking forward to the stir you’re going to cause with the single males.”

Her eyes flashed with frustration, and maybe a little hurt. When her cheeks flushed, he could smell her embarrassment.

“In a hurry to pass me off to someone who wants my company more?” She choked a little on the words, looking away from him.

“You’re like a child.” He spoke to himself as much as to her. “You don’t know what you want. Every dominant male is going to attract you. You’re instinctively drawn to contact. It’s why I’m your guardian, to protect you from yourself until you learn to recognize what you really want.”

“Child?” The word slashed through the air, bitter and incredulous. “Great. Fantastic. I need a babysitter like I need a hole in the head. Wonderful.”

He watched her eyes change with her temper, the pupils narrowing to slits as the color lightened to fiery gold. Adam thought she would explode, strike out somehow, get rid of some of the emotional pressure trapped inside her. He hoped for it. Instead, she set her jaw and took a slow, steadying breath.

“I’d like a little time to cool my head.” Her voice controlled and so very contained, he thought she might strain something with the effort. “I’m going to walk on ahead.”

Lengthening her stride, she put distance between them. Adam let her go and something deep inside him knew more than physical space separated them. His cat

didn't want the gap. He couldn't help but admit she had been the one to come out of their exchange on higher ground.

Mackenzie headed back to town, returning the same way they had come to get to the train station. She sensed Adam trailing along behind her, giving her space to cool her temper. Memories threatened to rise up around her in reaction to being followed, but he strolled out in the open, a respectable distance back in her wake. Somehow, he represented more an assurance of safety than a threat.

So, she found herself taking her time once her initial momentum had spent itself. She walked and looked at the world around her, holding her hands out to the sides. She brushed her fingertips lightly over the rough texture of tree trunks and trailed whisper-soft over delicate leaves.

Pausing, she closed her eyes here and there, deliberately expanding her chest as she took in a breath to consider the scents floating around her. Other times, she held perfectly still and listened to an unfamiliar bird call or rustle in the underbrush. The forest held more beauty than she'd ever imagined, once she had the time to soak it in. Everything about it was new.

"Dad's gone now, back to the city." She murmured the words to no one in particular. Maybe Adam had a point or two in his comparison to her being a child. Not in the way he'd meant it though. She felt small and afraid, alone on her own. She was on her way, even if she didn't know exactly where she could be headed and feared she might be lost, but anything would be better than the path Van had chosen for her.

Van. Her ex-boyfriend, her stalker. He'd killed her, in a way.

She didn't know when it would become clear if she'd made the right decisions since the night he'd done it to her, but she knew she'd taken the important step to begin making her own choices again.

"But, now there's no one."

Melancholy clung to her and she couldn't shake it. She'd felt a little lighter after the class and again at lunch earlier in the day. Learning to use chopsticks had been interesting.

But when her father had left, it hurt. She'd realized, standing there on the train station platform, she hated being alone. She couldn't even blame Van for it. She'd always felt a deep, aching loneliness even friends, family and the bustling rush of the city could never fill.

Van's charismatic presence had pushed the emptiness aside. He'd been a loner too. More so, it seemed to Mackenzie, because he'd been a shapeshifter away from his pride. He'd resonated with her on a level no other man had before. The romantic offers he'd given promised sweet darkness, like the purest of chocolate. They had been a rich seduction to Mackenzie's soul.

And then the seduction had torn her soul to shreds.

"You lied to me, Van. You lied to me and then you ended me, killed me with your claws and those freaking promises."

She wanted a day when she could be free of the memory of him, when she could overcome her fears born of him.

But being alone, loneliness had been there all along.

Her inner cat told her a pride held the answer. One jaguar in particular had her inner cat's interest, making his following her even better.

Mackenzie shook her head, knowing no one would hear her. "I guess we'll see where things lead me, because damned sure, I'm not going back."

As they came to the edge of the forest at the road leading into town, Mackenzie paused for Adam to join her.

He decided to break the awkward moment hanging between them. "What did the snail say when he rode the turtle's back?"

She sighed. "What did the snail say?" Her tone carried exasperation, but a smile teased at the corner of her mouth, if he could coax it the rest of the way out.

Adam raised his hands above his head, fingers spread wide. "Wheeee!"

"Oh, good grief." But the moodiness had been replaced by reluctant amusement. He'd take it. Thankfully, she wasn't the type to stay negative for too long, quick to blow up and quick to get over it.

"Into town?" He grinned at her and nudged her with his shoulder.

Her dark brown eyes were neutral as she glanced up at him. "I'd like to pick up a couple of things from the grocery."

She held her body stiff, the careful distance obvious in her tone. Apparently, she hadn't quite forgiven him for his earlier assertion, indicating she didn't know what she wanted. But she didn't sulk either, so he pressed onward instead of dwelling.

He started at a brisk walk towards the communal kitchen and store again. The town streets bustled with more bodies than there had been earlier as people ended their work days and in town running errands.

"There are more humans here than I expected," she commented, watching people as they traveled up the main street.

He shrugged. "Not a lot of humans prefer to live outside of the city, true, but more than you'd think are attracted to River Gap Territory. There's a decent tourist business on the outskirts of the territory."

"Tourist?" She turned to look at him with a single eyebrow raised. "Recreation and vacations for my family had always been in other cities or at one of the indoor resorts. We never visited places outside city limits."

"Remember, the Conservation is responsible for the well-being of the wild and the wild things, including us." He used his best teacher voice. "Part of the reason humans destroyed natural resources before the Cataclysmic Wars was because people didn't truly understand how intrinsic to the survival of everyone the wilderness had been until too late."

Nodding as she followed along, she didn't seem to mind the lecture. She even prompted him further. "The wars were devastating to all of us, human or shapeshifter."

"But, if one good thing came out of all the death and destruction, it represented the chance to start over and restore the balance between nature and technology. The Conservation has established educational programs on wilderness recovery and energy conservation so we don't go back and repeat history." He waved his arm in the general direction of town. "There's a few lodges where humans come to, to go on day hikes or to participate in weekend seminars. A lot of them finish up here in town."

"Just day hikes and weekends?"

“Most only stay for a short time,” he admitted. “The few who want to stay longer make the request to the pride for permission.”

They paused as she continued to watch people. She didn't ask another question, so he continued.

“There are several engineers and their families living on the outskirts of town. We work with them to develop and design ecologically friendly power generators and water systems. In exchange, they are allowed to live in the territory for the term of their contract and their children attend school with ours.”

“For how long?”

“Two year cycles, usually.” Internally he cheered. He'd caught her interest and the shadows cleared from her eyes. “Most want their kids to return to the mainstream schools in the cities before long. Not too many really feel comfortable so close to the disorganized wild.”

He didn't bother to hide his grin as she shot him a look.

“So most of the buildings around the guest house are temporary,” she guessed, her narrowed eyes relaxing and her nose scrunching up as she considered it. “It all had a sort of prefabricated feel, like city apartments.”

He couldn't help reaching out and tugging a lock of dark hair. The silken strands slid through his fingers.

“That's for the comfort of the families staying there.” He bent to the ground to scratch out a rough diagram of the layout of the territory. “And it provides a buffer between the town, with its train station and helo pad, and the main territory of the pride. The shapeshifter families make their homes beyond the buffer, close to the school but far enough away for some privacy. Homes for pride members are custom-designed to the family's specifications. There are a lot more features built into the houses to accommodate the needs of big cats.”

Bending close, she looked over his shoulder at the drawing. “Like really big scratching posts?”

She'd meant it as a joke, but Adam nodded as he stood, grinning at her surprise. He didn't miss the way she gave ground, resisted the urge to step after her. “Climbing trees and logs for sharpening claws are some features. Jaguars have powerful shoulders and

forelegs, sometimes it's nice to have something to sink your claws into for a firm grip and get a good stretch.”

“And deeper in the wilderness?” Watching him, her stillness returned.

First to look away, he cleared his throat. “The more dominant shifters who need more privacy and are more territorial prefer being out in the wild where there’s space to breathe.”

“I would have thought the families would have been at the center.”

He could almost see the thoughts turning over in her mind. “Not a bad assumption.” Happy she tried to see things from a shapeshifter perspective, he pressed forward with more. “But it’s a balance with convenience too. The kids need to get to school and it’s good for them to socialize with humans and other shapeshifters. They don’t need the solitude as much. Plus, families take turns watching the kids. It’s easier to be near other families and closer to the school and the amenities in town. The Sentinels rotate watches to make sure the town is secure around the clock.”

“So, the town is the central hub of activity.” Once she said it, tiny muscles in her face seemed to relax, as if some niggling thought had finally settled into place. The realization hit him—she’d been struggling to find a similarity to the way she’d grown up.

“It’s a social center,” he encouraged, “without being overcrowded. And, there’s wide open space to let your beast run nearby. It’s a good mix of the things shapeshifters need.”

“And how well stocked is the grocery store?” Her eyes tracked slowly over the rows of goods as they entered.

Handing her a basket, he took another in case she’d need more supplies than the one could carry. “It has all the basics plus some fresh meats and vegetables you might not find in the city. Some of the more specialized, refined items might not be here, but if you ask at the main counter they could order it in for you.”

Absently, she nodded as she began to browse the aisles.

“If it’s fresh game you want, we could always go catch it ourselves, too.”

The suggestion got her to turn and look at him, her eyes widened in alarm.

His grin held a touch of feral. “You’re a big cat now. Even kittens need to cut their teeth sometime. We could get you a fat rabbit or two to try out.”

She swallowed, a little pale under the tawny gold of her skin. "You run down rabbits?"

"Me?" He shook his head. "I go for bigger game. Deer, mostly."

A pause and he thought she might still be too city-soft to rise to his bait, but she exceeded his expectation.

"I'll give it a try." She spoke slowly and he saw her eyes lighten a shade as her cat came closer to the surface. "It's not like I haven't eaten the meat before. I've never had it quite so ...fresh."

Leaving it there, she turned and started her shopping with maybe a little too much enthusiasm.

Quick and efficient, she moved along the aisles without hesitating or looking around in confusion. Relieved, he followed along. He didn't like shopping with females who took forever to decide what they wanted. When her basket filled, he took it from her.

"No worries." Waving off her protest, he lifted the loaded basket easily. "Get what you need."

"I won't be much longer." And she wasn't. But at the last moment, she stood undecided as she studied a shelf full of chocolate.

"Can't find something?" He leaned over her shoulder to see what she found so fascinating.

"Well," she hesitated, still studying the shelf. "There's chocolate for baking and then there's chocolate for comfort. I can't decide which to get."

There were differences in chocolate? He liked a good chocolate chip cookie as much as the next person, and shapeshifters savored the pleasures of desserts for sure, but he'd never thought about differences in chocolate specifically.

Glancing up, she must have seen his confusion. She started to explain, pointing at a bag. "There's semisweet chips, which are really good in chocolate chip cookies."

Her words echoed his thoughts from a moment before and Adam decided to pay close attention.

"Then there's dark chocolate, really dark chocolate." He could almost hear the purr in her voice. "It's the best for comfort."



He didn't think comfort accurately described it as he studied the heavy-lidded look on her face. Suddenly, she became a much more sensual adult than he'd ever seen her.

"Some dark chocolates are fantastic to eat right away, but they don't melt well in milk for hot cocoa, like stone ground. Straight up, they have a lot of character, but melted, they leave a weird taste." As she wrinkled her nose, her tongue peeked out. In an instant, she was a child again.

Released from the spell, he swallowed hard. He wondered if he should risk buying her a café mocha at the coffee shop before returning back to the guest house. Probably not.

"I'm sorry." She shook her head, silken hair swinging out around her face. "I'm being silly."

"No." Clearing his voice of the gruff tone, he gestured at the chocolate. "Get what you like."

She nibbled at her lower lip in thought and then nabbed a bag of the semi sweet chips and a bar of dark chocolate.

He raised an eyebrow.

"One's for cookies." Defending her choice, she lifted her chin. "And this kind is good for hot cocoa or ...or enjoying as it is."

"Thorough."

"It doesn't hurt to be prepared for all contingencies." How she managed to say it with a straight face could've been anyone's guess. The slight flush of rose at her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes gave away her composure.

A smart cat, he only nodded.

As they left the market with her loot, he considered buying her café mocha anyway. Then his cell chimed in his pocket. He fished it out and activated it as he held it close to his ear. "Yeah."

"Adam, we have a situation." Mack spoke, one of the Enforcers at the outskirts of the territory and one of the instructors at Jake's school. He held the same nickname Mackenzie answered to.

Adam froze, scanning the streets. His cat on alert, he automatically shifted to block her from the street. "Go ahead."

“We’ve caught an intruder. He had forged travel documentation. Thought he could get by with those when we caught him, but he didn’t come through the main check point.”

“Shifter?” He hoped they’d caught her stalker. He’d do anything to take away the fear lurking inside her.

“Human.”

Not him, then. Her stalker was a southern peninsula panther. He might be able to hide his scent from a tracker, but he wouldn’t be able to hide it from an Enforcer facing him at close range. He wouldn’t have been able to pass for human.

“Contacted you first, because he insists he needs to see Mackenzie.” Mack’s growl deepened, his words short and bitten off. “Says he knew her attacker.”

A dangerous risk, shapeshifters were fiercely territorial. They had to be, to survive the wild. The Conservation had been established not only to restore the wilderness but to provide ruling guidelines for the shapeshifters. But it only provided guidelines. The dominant pride or pack in each territory had final jurisdiction. Any intruder, shapeshifter or human, who ventured into a territory without permission, ran the risk of facing a harsh, and usually permanent, reaction.

“Name?” He didn’t really want to know, but he had to check to see if she actually knew the human.

A long pause. “Documents are forged, but the male says his name is Devo.”

“Hold him for now. Call in one of the patrols to watch him.” Suddenly the town presented too much danger, with too many potential threats moving close to his charge. “I’ll get back to you.”

As soon as the call ended, Adam turned and herded her back in the direction of the guest house.

She didn’t struggle or waste time, but she wanted an explanation. “What?”

“We’ve got a situation.” He bit off his words, blunt, his voice flat.

He cursed inwardly a moment later as panic shot through her and filled his nostrils. His internal cat clawed at him to eliminate the danger, destroy any and all causes of her fear. He strained to keep his beast from bursting through the calm surface he maintained.

"It's not him." He clarified through clenched teeth. "But it's some human who says he needs to see you."

They arrived at the guest house as the sun faded behind the trees. Evening darkness gathered as fireflies rose up out of the cool grass to fill the air with their tiny lights.

Breathless with the speed of their rush, she panted in distress. Adam's beast only slightly calmed once he had her in the guest house. To his cat, the temporary human dwelling couldn't be safely defended. But she felt comfortable there, familiar with it, and he didn't yet perceive enough of a danger to move her.

"Who's Devo?" He couldn't keep the faint growl from his question, his cat restless inside his head.

"Devo?" Her face drawn and her lips pressed tight. "He's someone I knew."

"Is he a threat?"

"I-I don't think so." Taken by surprise, her heart still kicked at a high rate. He heard the staccato beat, saw the flutter of pulse beneath the silken skin at her neck. To him, her fragility left her vulnerable. He wanted, *needed*, to remove every possible danger from her physically and emotionally.

He took a deep breath, steadying himself. "Why would he come looking for you?"

Her mouth hung open for a minute, and then she clamped it shut and walked into the kitchen to set down her package of groceries. He waited impatiently while she stalled and thought it through. He gave her space with an effort.

"He shouldn't have known I'm staying here." Mackenzie's brows drew together, her mouth twisted into a confused frown. "But, the last time we talked wasn't the greatest."

Not looking good for the human. "How's that?"

Mackenzie blushed, but answered him. "I don't date multiple men at a time, but I've never promised not to. Devo pushed for a stronger commitment in our relationship, but I wasn't ready, wanted to keep things light. Devo and I got into a fight and he called me some things."

Adam growled.

"He shouldn't be looking for me." She shot him a nervous look and didn't continue until he swallowed another growl. "But we had friendship before we became...something more. He used to coax me into coming out to dinner with him by saying he wanted the

pleasure of a friend's company. He'd always pick these posh restaurants and splurge, claiming more fun with a friend." She frowned at the memory. "And then in the fight, he said either I'd used him or I was absolutely naïve if I believed him. Said I was a kid."

"You're inexperienced." Adam didn't mind driving the point home since the opportunity presented itself.

The look she shot him slashed so fierce, he thought she'd drawn blood. "You need to let that go and get a new point to hammer on." She paused for a moment, daring him to speak. When he didn't, she continued. "Devo called me a user, stringing him along and squeezing him for cash. He swore I should have known his intentions held more than friendship regardless of what he said. I got fed up with having to read past the facade and stopped talking to him." She raised her chin. "I stopped trusting him. So, there's no reason he'd be looking for me."

Adam relaxed slightly. The history she described sounded like drama, but it wasn't danger. The human named Devo didn't terrorize her. But Adam's cat still didn't like the man anywhere near her.

"Did you believe him?"

She blinked, not expecting the question. "I said I stopped trusting him."

He shook his head slowly as he stalked around the counter, standing so close her breath fluttered hot across his arm as she looked away. "But did you believe what he said to you?"

"No."

He smelled the change in her scent, heard the skip in her heartbeat, saw the slight change in her body language. "Lie. Try again, Kitten."

"He said I used him." He sensed the hurt, how it kept her anger from rising to the surface. "He said I used every guy who came anywhere near me, used them up until they were nothing but ashes."

Rage swept across Adam's vision and rumbled through his chest.

"I didn't set out to use him, or anyone." She blinked rapidly, those dark brown eyes tear bright. "But, it has to be someone's fault when a couple breaks up. Not every guy I've ever known has been as bad as Van, not every relationship ended so black and white."

"Ass." Adam snarled.

Startled, she looked up at him, her eyes widened in surprise. "No. He hurt because I wouldn't give him what he wanted. I've been dumped before, I can understand how he felt to be dumped by me." Exasperated, she gave a huff, blowing a few locks of hair off her forehead. "Look, contrary to the evidence at hand, I don't have such a bad a track record for picking men. Devo isn't even bad, only full of himself, and one insane stalker in my history is more than enough. I've got plenty of normal ex-boyfriends who weren't the right fit."

"Any ex is an ass by default." Adam's voice became suddenly too light, too pleasant.

"How so?" She narrowed her eyes at him and he felt his anger ease back on the stranglehold he had on the mental leash. Unlike many, she didn't buy his flippant tone.

He shrugged. "If they dumped you, they hurt you and are therefore asses. If you dumped them, they must have done something to screw up and are therefore asses. Simple."

The human, Devo, had hurt her and said things to lose her trust. Therefore, Devo should be kept away from her.

Besides, she hadn't said as much, but Adam guessed their relationship might have become intimate. His cat wouldn't let anyone near her who might try to claim intimacy privileges so soon after her attack. She wasn't ready.

"We'll send him back to the city." Decision made. Send him back, or Adam might kill him.

She hesitated, nodded slowly, but made no protest. He studied her, realizing the space around her echoed. She looked so alone.

Moving slowly, fighting not to, even as he reached out to her, he gathered her into his arms and held her to his chest. She stood stiff at first, but slowly the tension melted away as she breathed deeply, her face tucked into his shoulder out of sight.

She relaxed into his arms, soft and warm and silken. Strength waited there too, and the beginnings of trust. Her confidence would build, in him and in the pride giving her protection. She had so much courage, to come out of the city and into the wilderness, away from everyone and everything.

He pressed his lips to her temple, teased by the fluttering pulse under satin skin. Her heart rate quickened and his arms tightened around her, melding her against him. Rubbing his cheek against her hair, he savored the softness of her form pressed against his body. When he brushed another kiss over her temple, she lifted her face and sucked in a breath.

Her arousal began to fill the air around them with sweet spice. He stepped back before he did something he couldn't forgive himself for and ran a shaking hand through his hair.

"W-what?" She stood a little unsteadily in the middle of the kitchen, her eyes slightly out of focus.

"I need to get to the patrol holding him, Kitten, and send him on his way." He said it gently, knowing she needed to calm down to get her thoughts back again. "You need to go to the bonfire, where there are backups to keep you safe while I'm gone."

"The bonfire?"

"Liam will be disappointed if you don't show up."

She frowned. "He's nice, but..."

"He's a good guy," Adam forced himself to say, though the words stuck in his throat. "He'll make sure you have fun. It can't hurt to have a little fun."

"You'll come back to the bonfire after Devo goes home?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." He could see it in her face when she agreed. She would ask him about what hung between them. With all she had to learn, she shouldn't worry about it.

"The kids will love meeting you, Kitten, you'll have fun." He put a little push behind the phrase.

They turned to head back out the door. He scanned the area outside before letting her come out of the guest house.

As they walked quickly through the gathering dusk, he looked back at her. Her brow wrinkled as she continued to think. *How did he know how to find me?*

## Chapter 5

A half hour later, Adam stalked towards Mack alone and in a foul mood.

Mackenzie's question had pushed his cat over the edge. The urge to protect her, to hold her and mark her so no other male would even consider touching her, had been so strong he'd had to rush her to the bonfire and away from him.

His cat had fought him, only backing down when he left her in the care of several other Sentinels. His pride brothers could be trusted without question, even by his cat, blinded by inexplicable need. With the families and children running everywhere, the bonfire had the most protection in pride territory. Surrounded by children, Mackenzie would be safe from the pressure of adult males. The Sentinels wouldn't make a move on her because they had to keep everyone there safe, leaving children and juveniles. The logical part of Adam's mind reinforced the thought that easy interaction with juveniles would be better for Mackenzie.

Giving her the best protection he could from himself, Adam put distance between them. He decided to direct his cat's attention to the human stupid enough to follow her.

"Adam." Mack stepped out of the gloom, a huge wall of solid muscle.

Adam snarled in response.

The Enforcer held up his hands. "Hey, easy there. What got under your skin?"

It wasn't something Adam planned on answering, so he shot a question back.

"Where's this Devo kid?"

"Not a kid, Adam." Mack turned to lead Adam a short distance off the trail.

A full grown, human male sat at the base of a tree, looking to be in his late third decade. But, he had his back to the broad trunk and his knees drawn up, sulking like child. A tattoo ran up a forearm and a long lock of blond hair fell over one eye. Under the straw-colored hair were rough features and a nasty glare.

Adam stood in front of the human, folding his arms across his chest to hide the claws threatening to break past his fingertips. Mackenzie deserved better. It was a good thing she had already moved on, or he might have helped things along a bit.

Seeing Adam, the man struggled to a standing position. He'd taken a couple of taps from Mack, a decent-sized bruise darkening across one side of his face. The mark, more than anything else, told Adam the human had a knack for stupidity. Any shapeshifter would be stronger than a human, faster and exponentially deadlier. Devo must have resisted being detained. Resistance on a shapeshifter's own territory usually equaled a death wish.

As an Enforcer, Mack personified one of the elite—efficient and deadly. The human must be stupid, but lucky.

"I want to see Mac." Beside Adam, the Enforcer growled at the tone of voice. Okay, the human really was stupid.

Adam growled too, but he wanted answers so he reached for control. "Mackenzie is under River Gap Pride protection."

"I'm not a danger." Devo's face turned a blustering red. "I'm her boyfriend. I have a right to see her."

"She has stated she has no such attachments," he was inordinately pleased to say, even through his aggression.

"Look." Adam's sensitive hearing picked up the sound of grinding teeth as Devo spoke. "We had a talk. She didn't take things well. Doesn't mean she should run away. How am I supposed to trust her? I need to see her, work things out."

Funny how Mackenzie needed to earn *his* trust after the human had betrayed hers. It would be over Adam's dead body, or better yet, over Devo's.

He let his beast out, just a little. The color fell away from Devo's face and the whites of his eyes showed in the gloom of the coming night as he took in the predator standing before him.

"How did you track her to River Gap?" Adam's temper wore too thin and he needed to know the answers to her questions before the human pushed him past control.

"I'm her boyfriend," Devo insisted, crossing his arms. "I had a right to know."

"Her family wouldn't have told you." Of that, Adam was sure, even if she hadn't told him earlier. He took a step forward. Devo gave way, his fear a telltale scent in the air. "How did you track Mackenzie to River Gap?"



"Th-the freak told me." Devo shook, faced with Adam's leashed rage. "The shifter with sketchy black eyes. The mangy cat told me where to find her before I beat it out of him."

Adam's cat yowled inside his head. The sense of wrongness shot past anger at the human's disrespect. The human thought he was telling the truth, but something didn't fit right.

"What cat?"

Devo's face twisted. "The little monster who took her from me, thinking he could be all sorts of exotic and interesting. He convinced her not to commit to me, to our relationship, and then he made her break it off with me completely."

"How did you find him?"

"The cat was easy to find." Devo stuck out his chin, snatching bravado from thin air. "Practically hung out on Mackenzie's front doorstep when I looked for him. Stupid cat."

It meant her stalker had been close to her family and the human police hadn't noticed. The shapeshifter probably let Devo know where she'd gone for a purpose, but why?

"Get out." Done listening to Devo, Adam made a cutting gesture with one hand. "Mackenzie is River Gap's responsibility now. You do not have permission to be here. Get out or fight for your right to set foot on pride territory."

Lucky he'd been given even that much warning, Devo stumbled against the tree, and Adam's cat wanted to leap forward, to pounce on his prey and crush his skull. The human's fear had saturated the air around them.

"She left without saying anything, didn't give anyone a chance to talk to her," Devo babbled as he tripped onto the trail. He fell and crawled backwards on his hands and feet. "I only wanted to see her."

"Mackenzie is with River Gap now." Adam had no mercy in him, not a hint of genial teacher. But, at the moment, he was all Sentinel. "She is mine to protect."

The human turned finally, his fear too much. He scrambled to his feet and ran. Foolish, to turn tail and run from a predator, it only invited the chase.

It took everything Adam had to stand rather than run the human down.

Mack stepped up to Adam's side. "Not that I like that human, but you didn't have to scare the piss out of him."

Still riding the edge of his temper, Adam glared at Mac.

For the second time in the evening, the Enforcer held up his hands. "Easy, Adam. Easy. I'm saying you might want to go a little lighter on any other ex-boyfriends who come looking for her. She must have left the city in a hurry, and a real friend might come."

"She doesn't need friends like him." Adam bit the words out.

"Not like him." Mack agreed, nodding in the direction of Devo's flight. "But maybe she could use a friend or two she didn't know she'd need. A real friend would be good for her right now."

"The pride is what she needs right now."

"Adam." Mac's voice held neutral, not posing a challenge. He spoke as an equal. Mack had been there when Adam had chased away his childhood friend so long ago, in the aftermath of the real rage he kept locked away. Mack knew Adam's history. "Mackenzie needs anyone who can help her, especially if her stalker is giving away her location. There's a reason for it."

Adam's cat quieted a fraction as his temper cooled. He couldn't stay angry with a pride brother, especially when Mack spoke the truth.

"I'll talk to Marcus, we'll step up the patrols." The Enforcer spoke with assurance, "Any more...friends from her past show up and we'll detain them. One of the others might have a little better idea of what the panther's strategy is." He paused, and then Mack scratched his chin as he considered another thought. "I haven't seen you like this since back then. You're always in control of your beast. There's no need to be edgy, Cat, she's safe back at the bonfire. There's no place in the territory safer tonight."

Adam grunted. Suddenly, his cat needed to be gone, needed to find the sound of a specific voice and smell her fresh, honey and cinnamon scent.

And then Mack gave Adam a truth that stuck in his gut. "She's not a child. She's obviously got males in her history. I won't be surprised if ex-boyfriends start coming out of the bushes. She's the kind of person who leaves a hole behind when she's missing from a person's life."

“You met her for one hour in a class full of people.” Adam scowled, unwilling to think on it.

Mack snorted. “The girl lights up a room when she smiles. It doesn't take an hour to figure out people would miss her in their lives. She can decide who she will see.”

Sullenly, Adam pointed out his only defense. “She didn't want to see the male, Devo.”

Mack grinned. “Lucky, that. You gonna react the same way about a male she does want to see?”

Adam turned on his heel and stalked back into the forest without answering. Mack's chuckle followed him into the trees.

Adam had to see her, had to know she remained safe even though he'd left her in the most secure place possible. He could have called one of the Sentinels on duty at the bonfire, but he had to confirm with his own senses.

Stripping down, he shifted.

Energy crackled across the lines of his body as fur flowed over skin. He fell forward onto hands curling into paws and his legs realigned to support his stance. In the few minutes it took him, it was like stretching a little too far, enough so his joints ached, and then euphoric once it finished.

He grabbed his clothing in his mouth and ran on silent paws through the night towards the bonfire, towards Mackenzie.

Night birds and small animals froze as he passed them by. Powerful muscles worked under sleek fur, taking him down the trail, the forest falling silent at his coming and returning to life in the wake of his passing. He wasn't just one of the shapeshifter predators in the territory, but one of the strongest, the deadliest. Tonight however, he didn't hunt to fill his belly. His human mind wouldn't admit he hunted at all.

As he neared, he could hear the laughter of children interspersed with playful growls. Adam's logical side took back control from the cat, and he shifted back to human form, dressing before approaching. From inside the tree line, he could see Mackenzie. Firelight played across her laughing face, sparkling eyes free of shadows for a short time.

Liam held her hand as the two of them danced with a circle of children. Adam's focus sharpened as he studied the linked hands. The juvenile definitely had interest in Mackenzie, but her scent held no arousal and no interest as far as Adam could tell from a distance. Having fun with Liam and the children as they all danced in a ring, she showed no sign of the chemistry indicating a mutual interest.

Not that Liam wasn't trying. A moment in the game came when all of the children fell down like leaves shaken from a tree. As Mackenzie fell, laughing, Liam managed to break her fall and get his arms around her at the same time.

Smart boy, a part of Adam's mind thought, but his cat growled. He wasn't sure what he would have done if Mackenzie hadn't immediately gotten to her feet and disengaged from Liam's arms, still laughing to ease the space she'd put between them.

Adam shook his head as his inner beast clawed at his insides. Too confusing, this swinging back and forth between hot and chill, he couldn't keep it simple. His rational side wanted Mackenzie to interact with the lighter interests of the juveniles, their relationships closer to human dating. They would allow Mackenzie to ease into the sensuality, an inherent part of her new nature.

The cat inside of Adam felt differently. A low growl finally escaped as he watched Liam tug her away from the group of playing children. Nearby, a couple of other juveniles jumped and turned to regard Adam nervously once they spotted him in the tree line.

"Come on." Liam coaxed with a gentle tug on Mackenzie's hand. "The kids are fine. They'll tire you out completely if you let 'em."

"But they're so cute." Mackenzie couldn't stop smiling, her chest filled with bubbling giggles and the warmth of innocent play. She turned to wave at the children as they called her to come rejoin the games.

"They'll be here later." Liam reassured her. "I wanted to show you some constellations."

A small form detached itself from another group of children and shot across the clearing. As the child launched towards Mackenzie, he shifted in mid-leap, landing

against her chest. Too startled to do anything but bring her arms up around the furry bundle, she stumbled back a few steps and stared down at the jaguar kitten in her arms.

Time stopped. It was her first time seeing a shift since Van had partially transformed to tear into her flesh.

But the tiny face looking up at her wasn't anything dark. No hint of madness, no twist of insanity lurked in those bright golden eyes full of mischief while a warm, rough tongue licked at her jaw. Soft paws reached up to gently bat her cheek, claws carefully retracted. The fur in her hands soft and fluffy and warm, she sensed nothing sharp about this bundle of innocent love.

"No fair," said a new voice. "Why does a kid like Sho get to be so comfy?"

She looked up in time to see Liam scowl. Another boy walked towards them confidently, giving her an easy smile full of charm and promises, inviting her to smile back.

"Yo, Cal." Liam greeted the new boy with a lift of his chin. He stepped closer to Mackenzie and slipped a hand around her waist. Her hands still full of kitten, Mackenzie didn't know what to do, but she didn't miss the preemptive possessive gesture.

"Hey, Liam." Cal returned the greeting easily, his eyes on Mackenzie. "We were admiring your new friend. She's taking classes with Adam over at Jake's school. I hear she's a natural, really good at picking up the moves."

Deciding she didn't want to play male games, she introduced herself. "I'm Mackenzie, but my friends back home call me Mac. Nice to meet you."

She directed the last to the kitten in her arm. He purred in response and gave her another lick on the jaw. He hadn't been in the group she and Liam had been playing with and must have decided to wait for her attention after the game.

"I'm jealous." Liam looked down at her and the kitten, leaning in a little too close.

"Tough." She stuck her tongue out at him. He could flirt, but she'd played these games for years. Apparently, some things crossed the species barriers between shapeshifters and humans. Even though Liam and his friend could cut a swath through their share of females, to Mackenzie, the kitten held the greater charm. She'd flirt a bit for fun, but Liam wasn't going to get anywhere interesting.

As nice as Liam had been all evening, nice only proved him a sweet boy. Nothing about him awakened the kind of smoldering heat she'd experienced with Adam at the guest house.

"So, are you done playing with the kits? You could come hang with a couple of us for a while, maybe dance with me?" Cal made the invitation to Mackenzie. Liam growled at the implication. Even little Sho gave a tiny rumble.

Mackenzie smiled, easing the tension by leaning against Liam's shoulder briefly. "I only promised one dance."

Liam smiled and relaxed toward her.

And then she added a little more. "And we had our dance just now with the kits, so I think I'm done dancing for the night."

The kitten in her arms batted playfully at her ear. She laughed and bit the kitten's ear gently in retaliation. It seemed the thing to do.

Suddenly musk filled the air from both the older boys. Grimacing, Mackenzie gently lowered the kitten to the ground and sent him back to the other children with a little nudge.

Looking at Liam directly, she spoke in a very quiet voice. "Enough with the testosterone. I'm not interested."

Caught in her gaze, Liam swallowed and then rallied with a shaky grin. "Still want to take a walk?"

Incorrigible, but she couldn't help the smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. He gave her an idea of what Adam might have been like younger, more carefree. She didn't want to lead him on, but he definitely turned on the charm and she couldn't call him a quitter.

Not to be beaten, Cal tossed in his own bid. "I'll go with you guys. If you're looking at stars, I scored higher in astronomy than Liam did."

"Is it true?" She studied Liam with an upraised brow.

He flushed red. "I scored higher in math and biology."

"I'll go with the both of you for a short walk." She raised her eyebrows and met each eye to eye, so there would be no misunderstanding. "Then we come back and you can introduce me to more *friends*."

Both boys seemed caught between happiness for the chance and disappointed at how clearly she was making the statement 'friends'.

Mackenzie chuckled but stepped away from Liam, walking between the two of them as they led her out of the clearing. It would be okay if she didn't end up alone with either of them. They could be blocks to each other. Besides, one or two of the pride Sentinels would be within hearing range.

"We're not going far, are we?" She eyed the darkening forest, shadows growing deeper as they ventured away from the light of the bonfire. The dark still gave her pause.

"Nah." Liam had regained his balance. Apparently, he planned to make the best of it. "Just far enough so the light from the bonfire doesn't keep us from seeing the stars."

As they walked, Mackenzie let the two boys verbally spar with each other. She nodded and made noises here and there at the appropriate time as she considered the kitten. Little Sho's shift from boy to kitten had caught her by surprise. She should have been frightened, or would have thought so.

Mackenzie prodded at the incident like a sore tooth, trying to figure out if it really hurt. It didn't. How could she be afraid of such a sweet kitten? No. The shift didn't trigger the terror she expected, so much as how it came to be. The shift as a natural thing she could accept, and then there was the Change used as a tool to impose will on the unwilling.

Something indefinable settled inside her, like a missing piece of the shattered parts of her fitting into place, bringing her a little closer to healed for a precious moment.

Liam's voice, rough and aggressive, brought Mackenzie back from the quiet place. "I asked her first."

"I didn't notice you staking a claim," Cal retorted with a dismissive wave of his hand.

The two had walked a touch faster than Mackenzie, pulling ahead of her. They stopped, toe to toe, the challenge obvious.

She shrank inward as she took in the confrontation. She hadn't meant to let the boys fight for her attention. Remorse ate at her. She'd thought she'd made herself clear.

"Stop it." She stepped up to them. "Just friends, remember?"

But the aggression level had risen past the chance of listening.

More words shot back and forth, angry and loud, punctuated by growls. Someone pushed, and a hard shove in return, and then the boys did something human boys would never do.

They shifted, fully.

Snarls erupted in the air as the two nearly-grown jaguars lunged at each other. Mackenzie stumbled back and fell to her knees as her voice froze in her throat. They were big, bigger than any animals she'd ever seen. These weren't cute, fuzzy cubs.

Liam and Cal circled each other and clashed, striking out with powerful forelegs. Their lithe, feline bodies twisted as they maneuvered for a grip with jaws full of wicked teeth. Their tails whipped around, stinging the air as they faced off against each other.

They lunged, blurs of gold and black. Growls filled the air and tufts of fur flew. Even with claws retracted, a hit did damage. Cal limped, favoring a hind leg. Snarling, his return hit landed, catching Liam in the shoulder. The two jaguars closed on each other, grappling.

Fear spread in a bitter tang across her tongue and worse, it was all her fault.

She remembered the scent of testosterone, the violence. Van had told her she had called to him, it was why he had come to her. Her longing had invited him. And he had ripped her, torn her flesh. He had bitten so deeply, she'd felt his teeth grind across her bone.

"Stop." A voice snapped out, so aggressive, she almost didn't recognize it as Adam's. The power of his one word rolled across all three of them. Relief came and left quickly as she watched Adam stalk past, putting himself between the boys and her.

The jaguars pulled back in the face of his dominance, but Adam's hands shot out and grabbed each of them by the scruff as if they were cubs. Both close to full sized, yet Adam lifted them off the ground almost effortlessly.

"Use your noses." Adam raged, truly angry, his voice distorted by the almost continuous rumble of his growl. "No female should ever suffer fear from your actions."

Ashamed, she knew it was her anguish hanging in the air like an echo of the violence that had taken place.

She trembled, unable to shake the flashback taking hold of her until Adam's voice had jerked her back into the present.



He gave an angry coughing roar, unique to jaguars. Both juveniles shuddered and she flinched hard. Fury radiated from Adam in waves.

Scrambling to her feet, she tried to step closer. "Stop, Adam, please."

"Strength isn't for showing off," Adam ignored her, his hard tone accenting the words with a rough shake to each of the juveniles in his hands. "It's for protecting."

She sobbed. She couldn't stand to see them punished. "It's my fault."

"No." But he let the two juveniles down to the ground. They sank low on their bellies at his feet, their heads turned to bare their necks in submission.

"Yes." She held stubbornly to the truth. "I was the adult here. Don't you see? Look at them."

"Don't take responsibility for this, Mackenzie." He strangled his words with the effort not to growl. Both juveniles looked at her with alarm as his attention turned to her. He strode forward, closing the distance between them and gripped her arms tightly.

"Don't? They were rough housing, right?" Mackenzie struggled to get her thoughts in line. "Competing because of me. I've seen this enough to know it for what it is. I should have been able to nip this before it got out of hand."

"You were afraid." He shook her a little, his fingertips digging into her upper arms enough to drive his point home but not hurting.

"My problem, not their fault," she insisted as her fear soured and filled her with shame, for having been afraid, and because Liam and Cal would suffer for it. And shame, because despite the situation, she could only see the shape of Adam's lips, only feel the heat of his body so close to hers.

His eyes dilated, filled with an awareness of her, fingers tightening on her arms. For a moment, she thought he might pull her to him again, wrap her in his strength and give her the kiss she'd been daydreaming about since he'd left her at the bonfire.

Instead he shook her. "They should know better."

"Do you? Do you know better?" His scent surrounded her, the rich scent of coffee filled her senses, only with a sensuous touch to it...like dark chocolate. She raised her head to look up at him, letting her body relax into his grip. She could feel her own cat stretch in a long slow motion inside her, in response to his proximity. The tips of her breasts brushed the hard planes of his chest and heat flared between them even through

the layers of clothing. She let her lips part in invitation as she said it again. "Do you know better?"

Adam's eyes turned fully cat and he growled, jerking her out to arm's length.

Frustration filled her, quickly burned away by the heat of anger and she asked him more questions. "They should know better? Better than what? Should they know I'm broken? Did you warn them?"

Silence. Anger still rolled off him, hot enough to supercharge the air around them.

Mackenzie embraced her own little flame, fanned it a little higher. "Don't blame them for my malfunction, Adam." He opened his mouth to say something, but she'd built momentum. "They behaved normally, didn't they? Rough housing and competing for a girl's attention?"

Twisting her face into a grimace, she hated herself for letting things get out of control. She threw off his hands, stumbling back a few steps, balling her own into fists as she felt her claws pierce her fingertips. Her cat yowled inside her head.

"Only, I'm not some girl! I'm not even normal, Adam! I'm too new to be an adult and seen too much to be a kid. I won't fit, and they don't have the skills to fix me without breaking me some more! It's not their fault!" She drew a ragged breath, swallowed a snarl. "All I'd do is make them dirty."

Tears fell, scalding her cheeks. She looked down, saw the two jaguars behind Adam, and retreated a few steps. She couldn't bear to see what they thought of her. The few bits and pieces that had healed at the bonfire shattered again.

"Friends." Her voice cracked on the word. Even to her ears, she sounded broken. "I can't even be friends. I'm sorry."

She turned and ran into the night.

Adam took a step after her, but the boys shifted back to human form, pulling the tattered remains of their clothes around their bodies.

"Adam, wait." Cal called out.

He turned to face them, snarling. His anger didn't target them anymore, but it still burned and he needed to go after her.

"We didn't know, Adam." Liam hesitated before approaching him, eyes cast down.

He tensed for a moment and then let his shoulders drop. "Like she said, I didn't tell you. And the girl is so strong, she can look so damned normal, you wouldn't know. "

"Yeah," Cal agreed, stepping up to stand with Liam. "We didn't know you'd called a claim on her."

Adam lifted his head lightning fast, baring his teeth.

Liam ducked his head slightly to show he intended no challenge, but he spoke his mind. "With all due respect, Adam, why didn't you hold her? Why did you leave her with strangers when you knew she still hurt?"

He didn't, couldn't answer them. His inner cat pressed too close to the surface and agreed with the juveniles. He shouldn't have left her. Hell, his cat wanted to stake a claim on her. But she wasn't ready, damn it. He did the only thing he could—turn away and track the object of his turmoil.

## Chapter 6

Mackenzie stalked forward, focusing on putting each foot down on the trail so she wouldn't trip and fall over her own feet again. The last thing she needed was to give Adam another reason to be amused by her. He'd follow her, she knew. Even if he'd been disgusted by her behavior, he would follow her to keep her safe, because he wouldn't— couldn't— abandon his duties.

“Duty.” The word stuck in her chest, making her breath catch. Her inner cat squirmed, frustrated.

Adam thought of her as a responsibility and a newbie, a kid. Mackenzie wrestled with her attraction for the handsome shapeshifter. She had to admit, for the most part, she didn't know how to handle the urges taking hold. She'd been spitting mad, and then she'd come on to him.

“Smooth, Mac.” Muttering and moving, all she could do. “About as smooth as shattered glass.”

In a lot of ways, he'd been correct comparing her to a kid going through puberty all over again. And round two proved to be as equally embarrassing as round one had ever been.

Fantastic.

She didn't plan to give him the opportunity to turn her down again. She wanted to chew on her hair and hide. The cat inside her head writhed in displeasure, wanting to claw at the male who'd spurned her. Not a bad thought.

And the boys, Liam and Cal—the last thing on their minds after all the dust settled would be friendship.

"Friends." Desperately unhappy, her chest squeezed around a hollow space where her heart used to be. "I can't even make friends."

It stung to admit it, but Adam had a point. He'd been right to make her go to the bonfire because she hadn't made any connection to the people who lived in pride territory yet. She needed to get to know people. She couldn't go back to the loneliness

that had driven her to Van in the first place. She'd have to venture out more and make an effort to learn about the members of the pride.

Before she knew it, her steps had taken her down the trail and to the front of the guest house. Mackenzie stepped up to the front door, reaching out to palm the front security panel, and froze.

Scent rose up around her, a strong musk hinting of earthy things hidden in hot, steamy shadow and under it, the faint touch of rot. She knew the scent, the only individual's scent she had learned without a doubt, before she'd even been Changed.

"Van," she whispered. His musk rose up around her, suffocating her.

She didn't look around, didn't look into the trees around the guest house, knowing he would step into a gap between the trunks so only she would see him. He had always been there in the city when she turned around, at the very moment she looked out a window or across a street. Time after time, he had found a way to step into her line of sight, so only she would know he was there and watching.

Trembling, Mackenzie kept her eyes on the door. It came into sharp focus and she knew her eyes were turning gold as the pupils morphed into slits. Behind her, the sound of footsteps came and she crouched down in a tiny ball, hoping to ward off the inevitable.

"Kitten?" Adam's voice came from behind. Relief washed through her in a wave so fast, she gasped at the shock of it.

And then came his sharp, coughing growl. She couldn't stay blind to the danger, her cat made her turn to see what came her way.

He stood a few feet away, his amber eyes slitted and scanning the area as he breathed deeply. Every exposed muscle in his neck and forearms stood in sharp relief, tense and ready to explode into motion. Fury radiated from him, infinitely more dangerous than the anger she'd seen a few minutes earlier.

"Adam." Her broken whisper would reach him, she was sure of it. Dangerous, yes, but she wanted to run to him and crouch in the shelter of his strength. Only, she couldn't. Her fear froze her in place.

He growled again and looked straight at her, capturing her in his glare. He reached out a hand and spoke with quiet thunder. "Mackenzie, come here."

The paralyzing fear fell away with his summons, and she stood, taking the few steps separating them, placing her hand in his.

He gave her hand a sharp tug, catching her up into his arms in an instant and started running through the woods. She clutched at his shoulders, too shocked to protest and too frightened to fight. Squeezing her eyes shut, she hid her face in his neck.

Her breath sounded harsh in her ears. Her heart beat erratically, pounding wildly counter to his running stride. Van's scent clung to her nose, lingering in her lungs until she could taste him. Adam's fierce grip grounded her, keeping her from falling over the edge of madness and panic. He held her to him as he carried her away from Van, away from her horror.

After what seemed like an eternity, the rhythm of Adam's run changed as his legs gathered under him and an inadvertent scream rose up in her throat as he launched them upward in an incredible jump. Her breath left on a rush as they landed and launched again, higher up into the branches of a huge tree. They landed on a platform, far above the ground.

Adam strode through a set of glass doors and into a living area. Dropping her unceremoniously on a couch, he pointed at her. "You. Stay there."

The command took hold. She wasn't going anywhere.

He turned away, punching a code into a video console.

"Adam?" A man's face came up on the screen. "I thought you were showing around your new charge?"

"Change in plans," he snapped. "I need a backup detail. The stray found her, Marcus. He found her and marked the guest house with his stench."

The man's face hardened. "I'll send Mack and two Sentinels to your place to collect her and a detail of Enforcers to the guest house to track him. Where do you want the girl?"

"She's staying here." There would be no debate. It was a done deal.

Silence fell for a moment, two. "Are you sure?"

"We're deep into ride territory here, and the bastard will have to come through my security to get her."

"All right." Though slow to agree, his alpha didn't question the decision. "Mack and the others will supplement your personal security perimeter."

"I want a report from the Enforcers at the border of the territory." Adam wasn't finished. When it came to protecting her, he would be doing a lot more. Blood would spill. "I want to know how he got past them and how he found the guest house."

"I'll be over with Mack and the others." Marcus sounded neutral over the video conference connection. "You stay with the girl. Understand? Rein in your temper and give her calm. The last thing she needs is you running rampant."

"Yeah." Adam cooled, but with fury simmering at the edge of his control. He hit the console and ended the call.

He turned back to Mackenzie. She sat where he'd commanded her to stay, curled up on the couch in a frightened ball. Pale and drawn under her honey complexion, her eyes wide as she watched his every move. Strung tighter than a violin string, she could be ready to snap at any sign of attack.

He cursed himself and struggled to center himself, to give her the calm she needed. "He can't get to you here, Kitten."

She didn't say anything, only waited, staring at him.

"I won't hurt you." He offered the promise, reaching for a gentle tone.

She began to tremble. Those huge, liquid brown eyes glistened as tears welled. His heart tightened at the sight. The jaguar inside him was torn between the desire to hunt down the danger to her, ripping the other cat to shreds, and curling around her to provide the soothing comfort she needed.

"Van," she whispered. "It was Van."

"You recognized his scent?" He moved slowly, kneeling down on the floor in front the couch.

"Like b-before." Her eyes still wide, stared unblinking, dilated with shock. "I don't know what he did, but I could always smell his musk. Even as a human, he made sure I'd be able to smell when he'd been in a room or at my door."

Part of Adam wanted to roar his anger and part of him hurt desperately at her pain.

"He was always there." Caught in the remembered trauma, she whispered bits and pieces of her nightmare, more than she'd told him before. "No one else saw him but me."

She choked out a laugh and it wasn't entirely sane. "At first I was flattered. I thought it mysterious and...darkly romantic. I was fascinated." She began to tremble more strongly. When Adam held out his hand, she gripped it until her knuckles turned white. "We went on a few dates. He seemed interesting, magnetic."

"A dominant male can be very compelling to females." Adam filled the silence when she paused.

She stared up at him with eyes blinded by memory. "He said he loved me. He said I was his. His to love, his to possess."

"He should have given you a choice." Adam put the force of truth behind his words.

She went on, still caught in the past, speaking to the room rather than talking to him. "If he had waited a few more dates, I would have fallen head over heels for him. I would have done it if he had asked. I was stupid."

"No," Adam replied so firmly she blinked and stared at him, really saw him with those sad, dark eyes. "It wasn't your fault. He exerted a power you weren't equipped to resist."

"You said dominant males can be compelling." The storm in her eyes dissipated. Piece by piece, she put herself back together again before his eyes.

He gently squeezed the small hand still clutching his. "That you resisted at all says something about how strong you are. That it took that much time to win you tells how much of a challenge you were."

"But he didn't wait." Her face crumbled. "He took me and ripped me. He held me and told me how much he loved me and..." Her breath hitched and her voice strained to a higher pitch. "His claws, he used his claws."

"Shh." He soothed the panic away as best he could, letting her continue, but keeping her panic from spiking out of control.

Her words escaped in the barest of whispers. "I remember how he held me and smoothed my hair from my face while I bled out."

"You survived." He prompted her to continue.

She laughed, the broken sound of it tearing into him. "Human police found us. There were too many and he ran. They took me to the hospital, but it was too late. The Change was taking over, and all they could do was tie me down to a hospital bed while I



thrashed and convulsed and screamed." A pause, a tear fell down the curve of her sweet, melancholy face. "When my dad tried to comfort me, I almost crushed every bone in his hand."

"Your father healed." Adam gave her the only comfort he could think of, knowing the horror she must have felt hurting a loved one.

"Medicine is good enough to mend a crushed hand in a few days." Bitter words, empty of life, spilled from her. "But not good enough to take the ... the whatever it was out of my blood, my muscles and bones."

"I can't take back the Change." There was no good in avoiding reality. "And, I can't make you human again."

"No."

"I can protect you from him." A commitment, he gave her his strength. "I can help you build your life, free of him."

"He's not...right in the head." She took a deep breath and eased the desperate hold she had on his hand. She didn't quite take her hand back though, and he didn't let her go. "He got past your Enforcers and into River Gap territory."

"We underestimated him." Inwardly, he cursed himself. He'd let himself get distracted by Devo and realized the stray, Van, must have sent the ex-boyfriend as cover to allow him to slip into the territory. The human unwittingly fulfilled Van's purpose perfectly, and they'd all fallen for it. "I'll meet with Marcus and we'll keep in mind this Van's insanity when we make our plans to catch him. We'll get inside his head somehow. He's on our territory now and we know the territory better than he could."

She dropped her eyes from his and studied her hand, still held in his grip. "You could give me my hand back."

He watched her with a steady gaze, admitting to both of them what he was only then realizing. "I can't quite make myself let go."

The admission hung between them, and he took a moment to savor the feel of those slender fingers in his hold. The delicate strength of her hand, fitted into his palm and the softness of her skin under his fingertips. His chest tightened and he wanted to lean forward, pull her to him and wrap her in his arms.

“I thought I was too new, too inexperienced.” She paused. “Like a child,” she challenged him, a spark lighting the shadows in her eyes as she tugged at her hand. He let her hand go, instantly missing the warmth of her in his palm. “You are.” But, even to himself, he didn't sound so sure.

## Chapter 7

Mackenzie walked slowly through Adam's home, considering the lingering warmth of his hand around hers.

Cleverly built alongside a huge tree, the house stood literally in the forests of River Gap pride territory. The care and the design of the home amazed her and wandering through it distracted her from the reason why Adam had brought her there in the first place..

Platforms supported the multi-level home, curving around the tree trunk. The huge branches surrounded the home, providing camouflage and perches for a shapeshifter in jaguar form. As high as it perched off the ground, no human could have reached even the lowest platform without some sort of assistance.

According to what he'd told her, security lasers had been installed all around the base of the tree and the surrounding area to form a secure perimeter around his personal domain. The motion detectors and biometric sensors detected any biologic larger than 50 kilograms. Anything, animal or person, not matching biometry records identifying them as one of the pride would be very, very dead. His security eclipsed the set up for the guest house. She understood then why he'd brought her here.

His home contained all the modern conveniences to be had in the cities. And yet, the overall feel of the place remained earthy, less structured. She hadn't noticed the difference as much in the design of the guest house. His home presented an open layout, each living space flowing easily into the next without the modular feel of city apartments. When the plexiglass walls were set to zero opacity, it felt as though he lived directly within the trees.

She peeked into the bedroom, trying not to admit to being drawn there because his scent was strongest. Masculine and luxurious at the same time, it provided the same comforting feel she felt around its owner. It took effort to turn away and explore other parts of the home.

Adam returned from the lower level, interrupting her wandering. "Are you hungry?"

Standing in the kitchen, she'd been exploring the eco-friendly appliances. She started to shake her head but instead her stomach grumbled. Grimacing, she admitted the obvious. "I could eat."

He flashed a quick smile at her. "You'll find yourself eating a little more often than you used to, like I told your father earlier. And, you should. It'll take the edge off and make it easier for you to stay in control of yourself."

Striding past her, he opened a few cabinets and the refrigerator for her to see. "What would you like? I've got cold meats, cheeses and bread for a quick meal or I have the supplies if you want to put together something more complex."

"I could cook." She offered, eager to have something to do. "Comfort food sounds like a good idea right now. I could make enough for everyone."

Four more shapeshifters had arrived a few moments earlier. He'd gone down to talk to them rather than bringing them upstairs for her to meet. It had taken her effort to sit and listen to the various voices, trying to identify the individuals. Even though he'd come back up, the others remained on the lower level. She could hear the muffled cadence of their conversation even if they kept their voices too low for her to make out the words.

"Food would be appreciated. We're doing more planning, and as soon as we're done, they'll start guard shifts right away. We might not have time to head back to get something to eat."

"It'll do me some good to be busy anyway." She began to bustle through his kitchen searching for the tools she'd need.

In many ways, Mackenzie felt exposed in his home. She hadn't acclimated to the open layout. Being able to see into and over the forest for miles and miles, without another building in sight, unsettled her. Stars came out in the night sky that had never shone down through the perpetual artificial lights of the city night.

And yet, the new part of her embraced the wild. It welcomed the unrestricted freedom such living offered. She'd felt pent up and restless in the confines of the hospital room and her family's apartment. What had once been comfortably close turned cramped and suffocating. She'd paced when she'd been able and always found herself aware of doors, windows or any other exits. The shapeshifter aspect of her had always been looking for a way clear.

Unable to reconcile the feelings yet, she ached for something to do. In the past, the kitchen had always been her place to work with her hands while her mind found peace and also had the most familiar layout of any of the rooms. Regardless of the amenities, a kitchen was still a kitchen, with all the same basic design elements.

"How long do you need?" She heard him shift his weight from one foot to the other. "One of us could get the groceries you bought earlier and bring them here."

She didn't turn to look at him, still unbalanced from the earlier conversation on top of the unsettled feelings and the turmoil caused by Van's nearness. She had too much to process. Instead, she spoke over her shoulder. "About an hour. You all okay with pasta-type food?"

"Sure." An awkward pause followed.

"Making sure you all liked it, even if it didn't run from you before you took a bite out of it." Keeping her eyes on the food she prepared made it easier to keep things light.

"Everything I need is right here."

His low chuckle sent shivers down her spine. "We make exceptions once in a while."

"I figured when I saw you eating noodles." She filled a pot with filtered water and ignored his additional chuckle with set determination, refusing to acknowledge what it could do to her. "But it doesn't hurt to check."

"One of these days I'll take you on a hunt. And you'll get a real feel for running something down and taking a bite out of it."

"Part of the lesson plan for us children?" She'd meant to keep her words light, but the edge came out. She didn't take them back or try to say more to soften them.

He remained silent but the strength of his scent increased. She couldn't read what it meant yet, but her jab had gained a reaction.

Ignoring his silence, she selected a few packages of ground meat from his refrigerator. He must stock his refrigerator fairly frequently to keep meat fresh instead of freezing it. It didn't matter what kind of meat it was, in her opinion, most red meats tasted good sautéed with the right seasonings.

As she started to heat a small amount of oil in a large skillet, she heard Adam leave. Without him there, staring at her back, the tension in her shoulders eased.

“How's she doing up there?” asked Marcus. Solid muscle and even more unyielding authority, he stood with his back to a wall, watching as Adam climbed down from the upper level

Adam grimaced at his pride alpha. “She's sulking.”

“How's that?”

“Ah, nothing.” He'd rather swallow his frustration rather than tell any of them what had happened to trigger her refusal to even look at him. Faced with her back and nothing to look at but her curved behind, he'd retreated from his own lair. He had to keep reminding himself he'd been the one to point out her inexperience. Instead, he kept facing the reality of her having been an adult before her Change and people didn't revert just because they became shapeshifters.

Leaving her with Liam had been a mistake. She hadn't been prepared for the way the younger males might compete for her. She wouldn't have known her subtle hints about friendship wouldn't get through their thick skulls. With predators, a negative had to be more than definitive, it had to have bite behind it. She blamed herself for what she hadn't been equipped to handle.

“She didn't seem to be the type to sulk.” Mack pitched in his uninvited opinion.

“You met her?” Marcus raised an eyebrow.

“Sorta.” They'd decided in martial arts class to call her Big Mac, because compared to Mack's towering bulk, she wasn't. Actually, compared to any of the males in the class, even some of the juveniles, Mackenzie's petite frame made the nickname a potential long running joke. “Big Mac enrolled in one of Jake's blended classes. She seemed pretty solid to me.”

"Get her riled up," advised Adam. "Then tell her like it is, even if it isn't the way she thinks, and you'll see what I mean."

"Dunno about that." Mack shook his head, his doubt obvious. "Seems to me, she kept pretty open to instruction in class. She listens better than most."

"What's she doing up there now?" asked Marcus. They could all hear the sizzle of meat. The mouthwatering scent of salt, pepper, onions and garlic wafted down.

"She asked if she could cook for everyone." Adam gestured toward the level above them. "Wanted something to do with her hands besides fret."

"Sounds constructive to me." Marcus kept a neutral tone as he ventured his opinion.

"Most of the juveniles couldn't cook to save their lives," Mack added, slanting his eyes sideways at Adam.

"Can we talk about security measures instead?" He ended the probing about Mackenzie. "We need to catch the bastard."

Grinning, Marcus watched Adam as if he had done something unusually interesting. "The target's home pride sent us what little intelligence they had. He's a former Enforcer. He's also known for unpredictable tactics which explains how he got past our security. Our people planned for convention and this guy is the embodiment of the ridiculous. His pride also made it clear he's no longer an Enforcer."

"Because he's gone rogue?" Mack puzzled over the demotion.

Adam didn't blame him for wondering. Sentinels and Enforcers usually kept their posts until they retired, too slow to fight effectively. It might be different in another pack, but Adam hadn't encountered it in the other prides or packs he had visited.

He gave Mack the answer at the same time Marcus gave another. "He's insane."

"No honor code."

All of the shapeshifters exchanged somber looks. The code of morals, ethics and honor they each held themselves to separated shapeshifters from true beasts. The level of the code of honor might vary from pride to pride, pack to pack, but it always intrinsically became a core value. A shapeshifter acting outside of a code of honor acted beyond right and wrong, perilously close to evil.

"He had to know we'd scent him around the guest house," Adam took it forward, balling his hands into fists. "He left his stink hanging thick around the entire area."

According to Mackenzie, he laid it on so even as a human she couldn't miss it in the city."

Mack growled. "Arrogant son of a ..."

Marcus cut off the anger, bringing them back to the facts. "He didn't leave a trail leading away from the guest house. He's in the wind and good enough to only leave a scent trail when he wants to. No signs on the ground or in the trees either."

"There's something wrong about his scent." With effort, Adam thought through the red haze of his anger. "Not only rotten. There's something off about the musk left around the guest house."

"I'll go check it out again." Marcus folded his arms as he studied Adam more closely. "In the meantime, how do you want to guard your girl?"

Adam's lips lifted in a silent snarl but Marcus only grinned. After a minute, Adam focused on the main point of the question, turning to Mack. "You and the two others divide the perimeter in sectors. Two of you patrol at a time and rotate with the third in shifts. Watch for anything and everything."

"You going to guard your girl up close and personal?" Marcus didn't let his question go.

Adam growled. "It's not like that."

"Funny." The alpha scratched his chin. "Looks that way to everyone but you. You're acting all sorts of territorial. You're unhinged."

"She's too new a shapeshifter to tangle with a mature male."

"You can't seem to see the forest from the high tree you're perched in, Cat." Marcus fixed an unwavering stare on Adam. "You might want to come down and get a good look at her before someone else does."

"I see her fine." Hell, he could see her even when he closed his eyes. "She doesn't need what I can be."

"Happened a long time ago." Marcus wasn't teasing anymore.

"It's not going to happen again." Adam's vision blurred with the sight of the little girl, liberally splattered in the blood of the man he had torn apart, her eyes fixed on Adam in utter terror.

"You did what you had to." Marcus held firm. "Back then, you were a guardian even before you officially became a Sentinel."

"Not the way she saw it." Adam choked out even as the bitterness strangled him. The little girl had screamed and screamed, unable to stop. After the incident, she filled the room with the acrid scent of her terror whenever she saw him, too traumatized to even look at him. Her human family moved to get her away from him, back to the city, to humans. Away from the monsters.

"Mackenzie has lived through worse." Marcus let the reason she had come to them hang in the air. And then he continued, "She survived torture and came to us for protection."

"So she knows it takes a beast to protect her from one." Adam took a shuddering breath and then dragged his hands through his hair. "It doesn't make any of us less a beast in her eyes."

"No way to know for sure." Marcus shrugged. "Nothing to do but give her a chance to decide on her own. There's no need to shut her out, and it doesn't do her any favors to protect her from what we are, what she is."

"She's thinking she's broken, dirty," Adam admitted, filled with misery. "I left her with Cal and Liam and wasn't there to help her handle their reaction to her."

"I heard." No anger, but the alpha's words were short. "They said she tried to tell them, but didn't put any force behind it. She's dominant enough she could have made it clear, but she didn't know how."

"I told her I'd be there to help her." Adam's gut twisted. "But, I hung back figuring the socialization would do her good. Now she's even more withdrawn."

And, she took the blame on herself as if she had control of her actions. It would have been easier if she'd cut herself a little slack, accepted she'd been too inexperienced.

His beast growled inside his head. There would have been no issue if Adam had claimed her, marked her. The boys would have known then and Mackenzie wouldn't have had to fend for herself.

"You got your head straight?" Marcus brought Adam's attention back to the conversation at hand. "Quit going against your beast. Otherwise she's going to think she should be battling her beast, too."



Mack stepped forward and drew in a deep breath. "Whatever she thinks, she's willing to feed a beast, that's for sure."

The simmering smell of dinner wafted down to all of them, eliciting rumbles from every one of their bellies.

They heard her pad across the floor and approach the trap door. "Dinner's going to be ready in about five minutes."

Adam moved with unnecessary speed, meeting her at the trap door and blocking her from coming down. "Dish it up and I'll bring it down to everyone. We're still talking security."

Taken aback, Mackenzie blinked, her eyes wide. "Okay. I'll set out the plates then."

She studied him for a moment before straightening and turning to head over to the kitchen.

As Adam stepped back down to the lower level, every shapeshifter looked at him with a wide grin. Mack dared to open his mouth. "Definitely unhinged, man."

Mackenzie watched Adam stalk across the room to where she sat on a stool at his kitchen counter. Once she'd dished up five plates of the casserole, he'd taken most of them down, leaving his plate next to hers.

So she'd waited, staring down at one of her favorite comfort foods. She'd browned the ground meat with a few simple seasonings and then diced and added fresh tomatoes, simmering it all down to a light sauce. The entire box of lasagna noodles had been broken, which suited her perfectly. After preparing the entire box and she'd tossed the cooked broken noodles with her meat sauce. A little extra searching had turned up a small cheese shredder she'd used to add mozzarella. The end result turned out hot, melty, cheesy and savory, exactly what she needed to chase away the cold knot in the pit of her stomach as she wondered when Van would find her again.

"Smells good." Adam hooked another stool with his foot and sat next to her.

"Hope it tastes good," she said in return. "I've no idea what kind of meat I used."

He used a fork to scoop a mouthful and chewed slowly. "It was venison and it *is* good."

Her cheeks flushed despite her annoyance at him earlier. So much for holding a grudge. "Something about hot and filling makes me feel a little better."

He smiled, shoulders relaxing a touch. They ate in silence for a few moments, enjoying the taste of the food and the quiet company.

"It's going to rain tonight." He tipped his fork towards one of the transparent walls, indicating the cloudy skies. "This kind of thing is good to keep a body warm out in the chilly rains we have this time of year."

"I'm sorry."

He glanced at her sharply. "Why?"

"It's my fault, isn't it?" She stared down at her food, unable to take another bite. "It's my fault you all have to go to this trouble, because Van followed me here."

He put his fork down and looked her straight in the eye, enunciating every word. "*None of this is your fault.*"

She froze at the intensity in his words and face. He meant more than just the patrols in the rain.

Releasing her from his gaze, he picked up his fork and continued talking around mouthfuls of pasta. "Besides, we all run patrols of the territory on regular shifts anyway. This only adds a little spice to our nights."

Doubtful, but since she didn't know what to say she stuffed a forkful of pasta noodles and venison into her mouth. Wincing, she sucked in air to cool her mouth.

Adam's snicker made her swallow the steaming mouthful. She pretended not to have an issue as it scalded her throat all the way down.

"I suppose you think that's all sorts of childish, don't you? Like a person can't forget how hot their food is."

He didn't even bother to stop snickering. "Well, it *is* cute. The look on your face was priceless."

"Lovely. I'm overjoyed I could amuse you."

Still smiling as he ate, his eyes held a different look. She scowled back at him as she applied herself to her food, careful to cool each bite. He watched her and it seemed as if his intensity changed slowly. She didn't know what to think of it.

"I'm sorry I called you a child." Still watching her.

“Sorry you called me one, or sorry you think of me as one?”

“Both, maybe,” he admitted, pausing before he added, “But mostly the first.”

“I’m a big girl.” She hopped off her stool and took her plate to the sink. Somehow, it didn't ruin her point. “I’ve had my share of guys turn me down. But if you're going to turn me down, be honest and say it's because you're not interested. Don't give me some excuse about me being too immature to know what I'm doing.”

She turned to face him and stumbled back into the counter.

He stood inches from her. Solemnly he leaned in past her and placed his own empty plate into the sink. As he straightened, he brushed so close he whispered roughly in her ear. “It wasn't because I'm not interested, Kitten.”

Those amber eyes were like molten gold as he stared down into her face. Mackenzie barely dared to breathe as his hand came up and brushed a lock of hair away from her cheek.

“You didn't know what you were starting to tangle with there.” His voice low, darkened with a sensuality she hadn't heard before. “I'm not some human boy looking for a few hot kisses.”

His hand slid along her jaw, turning to caress the back of her neck and then it slowly tightened, tilting her head back. Mackenzie's heart picked up speed and her breath came in shallow gasps as she trembled, held captive. She felt things low in her belly tighten in response to him. Even her nipples hardened as her back arched in response to the way he had her head tilted back.

“Playing with a jaguar is a more dangerous game, Kitten,” he continued with a low growl in his throat. His nostrils flared and his pupils seemed to dilate and elongate as they changed to his cat form. “You need to know before you initiate anything.”

From some hidden reserve of pride, she managed to strap some steel to her collapsing knees and pulled her lips back in a slight snarl. “I didn't initiate anything this time.”

He went still. Slowly, the grip of his hand on the back of her neck loosened and he backed away a bit. It was enough.

She straightened, trying to get her composure back. “You'd be damned lucky if I ever took it into my head to offer you a kiss again. I'm not a glutton for rejection.”

He was on her in a split second, the entire length of his body pressed against hers so she couldn't miss the hard length of his erection pressing against her lower belly. His arms caged her in on either side of the counter and his lips caught hers before she could say anything else.

His mouth burned against hers in a searing kiss. He gave her a brief moment before he sucked at her lower lip, then gently nipped and licked at the same spot until she opened for him. His tongue swept in, exploring and tasting, teasing as he drew back. She leaned after him, following his lead and uttering an inarticulate request.

Then he settled his mouth over hers and sent them both drowning in sensation. His arms wrapped around her, urging her to arch her back even more and meld her curves against the hard planes of his body. His hands ran over her spine and the curve of her behind, encouraging her.

She melted in the strength of his arms as he tasted the secrets of her mouth. For a few moments, she didn't want to be anywhere else.

And then a low growl sounded in his throat and his kiss became hungrier. He kissed her harder until his teeth bruised her lips. His arms tightened around her and his fingers began to dig in as he pressed himself against her.

Panic shot through her, and in a flash she could hear Van's voice crooning to her as his claws dug into her flesh.

She almost fell when Adam released her. Fighting to catch her breath, she realized he had darted to the other side of the room, putting the counter between them. In the gloom of the living area, his eyes reflected the light back at her in an eerie glow.

"That's why, Mackenzie." He strangled his words, barely understandable, his cat closer to the surface than she had ever seen.

She whimpered despite herself, torn between the desire he'd awakened in her and the horror of the memories.

Cursing, he started to move.

"I'm sorry." He bit out the apology. "Stupid of me, I shouldn't have done it. I'm sorry."

Mackenzie pushed herself up to stand on her own. She moved slowly around the counter, watching him pace back and forth like a caged animal.

"Don't be sorry." Overwhelmed with too many emotions, thoughts, she didn't want him to regret it.

"You didn't invite me," he snapped. "I'm no better than the bastard who Changed you."

He stopped suddenly, running a hand roughly through his hair and laughing shakily. "I ...when you talked about offering a kiss, I couldn't stand the idea of never having the chance again."

She remained motionless, watching him uncertainly.

He turned to look at her with miserable eyes. "They're right, you know. You have me absolutely unhinged."

He rushed to her and started pushing her towards the trap door to the lower level before she could flinch.

"You need to go," he said, the words tumbling out in a rush. "You need to go to Chryssa's place. You'll be safe there. I can concentrate on protecting the perimeter of their place. You won't have to worry about me on top of knowing the bastard is out there."

She dug in her heels. "Wait, what? No. Uh, uh."

"Kitten, you go down there, or I pick you up and drop you down ." Oh, and he meant it.

She turned in his hands to face him. Rather than have her in his arms, he backed away from her.

"Okay, I freaked." She admitted it, advancing on him. "You're right, I wasn't prepared for how scared I would get. But what? I don't get time to work through it? You're going to dump me someplace else?"

"You don't understand." His face contorted with the strength of his emotions.

"So explain it to me," she snarled right back. "I'm not a child, Adam. Explain it to me so I understand, so I can make an informed decision."

"From the minute you walked into the school, I wanted you." His control slipped the leash barely restraining him and he yelled at her. "You looked at me, and my cat wanted you right then and there. But you're damaged, Mackenzie."

"So." Was it possible to hurt like this? "You don't want damaged goods?"

"That's not it." He ground out the words.

She only blinked at him in bewilderment.

He began pacing again, agitated and upset. "You don't know. You're too new. You don't know what being a shapeshifter is, what kind of monster I can become."

"You're not a monster. Believe me, I'd know."

"I can be a monster!" Adam shouted back, too desperate to make her understand to worry about the others overhearing. "I've done it before, Mackenzie. I've ripped a man to shreds for hurting what was mine to protect. I tore him to pieces for hurting her, right before her eyes. I covered her in his blood!"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her knees give way as she sat abruptly back on her heels. She muttered vaguely, "Ripped to shreds..."

Coming to a halt he stood there, watching her caught in memories, giving her the truth hiding underneath the joking façade. "She was only a child, a human child." He laughed bitterly, and the sound held no joy. "I only had a year on her, a child myself. We played as friends in town and attended school together. A human male worked with the construction crews. He smelled bad."

"A male, smelled bad?" Still too new to immediately understand what scent could tell her about people, she didn't grasp it right away.

Adam gave her a bleak look. "The male started hanging around the school. None of us told the teachers or the Sentinels because he said he was a friend of her family's. Then one day he appeared at the playground, rushing her away from the school saying her parents had sent him for her, there had been an accident."

She uttered a painful, choked sound.

"I followed them, worried for her, but he didn't take her home. He took her to his rooms in the temporary housing. He took her in there and wouldn't let her out, molested her." His voice hardened. "I heard it, smelled it. I crashed through the window and stopped him from hurting her more."

He met her gaze directly as he made himself tell her. "I used my claws to tear him apart until there were only pieces left to pick up."

He wasn't going to hold back on the evil of it. He waited for her to look at him with the same fear she had when she thought of Van, the same terror directed at him so long ago.

Instead, Mackenzie's dark eyes focused on him with a clear gaze, shooting straight through him with sadness, but no fear, no terror.

"You were protecting someone, weren't you?"

"I traumatized her." His breath came in ragged gasps, his cat coming to the fore because of the self-loathing he'd held so close. "I committed an evil in front of her, and it couldn't be undone. Those were the words her father threw in my face right before he took her back to the city, to keep her safe from the beast. He took her to keep her safe from me."

Her gaze held steady, her voice full of conviction. "Your intentions weren't evil, Adam."

"The result ended the same."

She wouldn't accept his judgment. "But, I could be every bit as violent, couldn't I?"

"No." His denial sounded absolute.

"I could." She insisted, her face earnest. "Without you to teach me, I could. What if I had stayed back in the city with my family? What might I have done to my little brother and sister? What damage could I have done without a guardian to protect me from myself?"

"You don't know," he growled, watching her set her jaw in a stubborn expression, only making her that much more endearing. Despite himself, he felt his rage melting away.

"I do." Her voice darkened. "I've been right there, up close and personal, with the kind of monster a shapeshifter can be. You ripped apart an attacker in front of her, but Van ripped into *me*."

He couldn't respond. The earnest look on her beautiful face held him as she continued to break through all the facades he had erected.

"Monsters come in many forms," she whispered, her eyes bright with tears. "Human or shapeshifter, man or woman. You're not one of them."

"You don't know yet." He fought it, but her words soothed him. "You don't know me well enough yet."

"I've gotten a pretty good idea." She took a breath and tipped her head to one side, her expression clear of doubt. "And, I've got faith."

He dragged a hand over his face, his anger completely drained away. His inner cat had calmed, amused with Mackenzie's assessment, and the beast made up as much of Adam as the man. He couldn't maintain any kind of anger or rage, even if he tried to use it as a wall to keep her from getting too close. It would be more truthful to say he had been trying to use it that way.

"It's too soon for you and you're still too new." He tried to draw the line one more time.

"Are we going to go through the whole kid thing again?" More than exasperated, she sounded appalled.

"No." He fought not to let the chuckle out. "I give on that point."

"Then what's the new one?"

He grinned in spite of himself. "You're still too new to understand what it means to tangle with an adult male cat like me."

One eyebrow rose, those plump lips compressed and her look spoke louder than any words.

"An adult male like me, as dominant as me, could tumble you before you even realized it." He made it a matter of fact. "I don't share, and I don't give a lot of time for decisions. You tangle with me and it's a serious game. Remember, Kitten, we shapeshifters feel in extremes. Everything you experience with me is going to be much more intense than any of those human boys you might have traded kisses with back in the city."

"Whatever happened to going on a few easy dates and seeing where things take a person?" she muttered, blowing out a breath and lifting a stray lock of hair off her forehead.

"Should have accepted Liam or Cal then." He deliberately reminded her of earlier in the evening. "Easy is not the way it works with adult males."



“The few shapeshifters I met in the city, studying at the universities, were casual in their relationships.” She said it slowly, not to argue with him but inviting more information.

“They were younger, not kids, but juveniles.” He dismissed them with a sharp cut of his hand. “Once a shapeshifter grows into her majority, what she is looking for in a relationship changes, too.”

“I take it growing into majority isn't set at the age of two decades the way it is with humans?” she asked curiously, her head tilting to the other side.

He shook his head, scowling at the way the ambient light played across the sweet curves of her face at that angle. He couldn't ignore her and his rage wasn't there to protect him from her. “Majority can take a cat close to the third decade depending on how dominant the cat.” He worked his jaw in frustration. “Look, the bottom line is you don't want this with me, Kitten. You want to go and play with a few of the juveniles first. Ease into being what you are.”

His cat snarled in his mind at the thought of her with others.

At the same time, she snarled audibly. “Always so eager to pass me off to someone else.”

“No!” Before he knew it, Adam fell on his knees in front of her, gripping her upper arms and shaking her slightly. “I ... want you too much,” He looked into those dark chocolate eyes and gave her the real truth, the root of it all. “When I take you, Kitten, there won't be anyone else. There won't be any walking away.”

He brushed his kiss across her forehead because her sweet lips were too dangerous. He rested his forehead against hers and listened to the galloping rhythm of her heartbeat in response to his proximity. When he spoke again, his voice strained with the emotion. “You choose me and there won't be any other choices. There won't be any half way.”

She took in a breath and spoke, slow and deliberate. “Adam, I...”

And then her cell phone rang.

Startled, she fell back as she scrambled for the slim phone unit in her pocket. He let her go, giving her space and giving himself a chance to rein in the intensity.

“Hello?”

“Mac?” The voice on the other end of the connection sounded feminine. With the advantage of his shapeshifter hearing, Adam could hear the other girl perfectly fine. He started to rise so he could walk to the other side of the room and give Mackenzie some privacy, but then the speaker continued. “Mac, you've got to help me. I'm so afraid.”

His attention sharpened as she sat up. “What is it, Stephie? What's wrong?”

“It...it's Van.” Stephie sobbed the stalker's name. The words tumbled out in a rushing flood. “He...I...we went on a date. I know you said he was bad news. Just figured you had to be exaggerating. I thought it'd be okay since you'd left. I didn't think you were interested in him anymore. But then he...”

“Stephie.” Utterly calm, she asked the important question. “Stephie, did he hurt you?”

A hesitation and then more sobs before Stephie finally blurted her answer. “Y-yes. Oh Mac, help me! He hurt me and hurt me, and then when I woke up, everything was all wrong. He won't let me go home. He said if I went home, the police would find me and throw me out of the city.”

“Shhh.” She did her best to soothe her friend over the call. It proved more than effective. Stephie's sobbing quieted and her breathing evened out. “It's going to be okay.”

He watched her, wondering if she even knew what she did and knowing she probably didn't. His Mackenzie would be dominant enough she needed special training.

Addressing the matter at hand, he motioned to get her attention. “Have her come here. I'll talk to Marcus.”

Nodding, she gave her friend a calm set of instructions to make her way to the train station and promised to wait for her.

“He's been gone for days.” Stephie hiccupped, no longer hysterical. “I don't know where he is or when he'll be back. He could be anywhere. He could come back any time.”

Adam saw the sad smile Mackenzie directed at him. “We've got a good idea of where he is, Stephie. You have time. Get to the train station.”

## Chapter 8

Mackenzie stood waiting on the porch of a small ranch house a mile from Adam's home. Tucked under a few trees, the quiet house looked out onto a small meadow. He prowled along the perimeter of the porch in human form and, watching the smooth play of his muscles under the skin of his arms, she wondered what he looked like as a jaguar.

"You should be inside the house." Unhappy, he stood on alert, his eyes scanning the trees around the meadow.

"Marcus said we were still deep inside River Gap territory," she responded, unruffled by his bad mood. Her encounter with the pride alpha had been brief but interesting. She got the impression Marcus had been mildly amused by her for the trouble she'd brought into his territory, rather than the annoyance she expected.

"It's still safer for you to be inside." Adam shot her a frustrated glance before resuming his prowling.

She stood her ground. "You have two others securing the perimeter and you wouldn't let Stephie go to your home. I'll wait for her here."

"You're lucky Marcus backed you when you refused to go to Chryssa's." He had no anger left in his posture, but he still projected unhappiness, obvious in the twist of his mouth, the set of his jaw. "It would have been even safer for you there."

"She is out on a two day hike with a set of students." She paused. "And I'd feel more comfortable with you, instead of locked up in a strange house alone."

*I didn't want to be alone.*

"I'd have been patrolling the perimeter." He stopped, turning toward her. His eyes held worry, as if he'd hurt her and hadn't meant to.

"This solution is better." He'd picked up how upset the idea of being alone made her, but she didn't want to acknowledge it. "Marcus is going to get Stephie, and we're waiting here. What is this house, anyway?"

He turned to scan the forest as he spoke. "There are a few small houses and cabins throughout the River Gap Pride's land. They sit in the buffer zones between individual territories as meeting places or for guests."

“Guests don't stay in your homes?”

He shook his head. “Big cats are territorial by nature. Few, if any, are welcomed inside the actual lair. The Sentinels and Enforcers are tightly knit, but even we don't stay in each other's lairs for extended periods of time.”

“Why?”

“Too dominant.” He crossed his arms across his chest, the definition in his shoulders and biceps rippling with the movement. “We've got better control than others, but we are all more dominant, more aggressive. We can't help challenging each other, given too much time together and on a personal territory.”

“Why me?” He had deliberately avoided mentioning her, so she asked, point blank.

“You?” His usually animated voice turned bland.

“You brought me into your home.” She said it quietly, as if it were a secret.

He fell silent. She could see tension across his broad shoulders, and her interest perked as she noticed a dusky red flush rising up the back of his neck. His scent wafted toward her on the breeze and she could smell his spicy musk more strongly, tinged with something else. Embarrassment?

“Mac!” Her head snapped in the direction of Stephie's voice. Adam had to have known she'd been coming.

Stephie ran across the meadow, heedless of the danger Adam guarded against. Built a touch slimmer than Mackenzie, with narrower shoulders and hips, her pale skin shone white and delicate as egg shells. Streaks of blond highlighted her soft brown hair, setting off her green eyes.

Watching her approach, an irrational worry struck Mackenzie. With Stephie there, Adam couldn't help but make the same comparison people always made. Shaking off the shallow concern, she started toward Stephie but before she reached the steps off the porch, Adam put an arm to stop her.

“Let her come to you.” His amber eyes had lightened to gold, his voice contorted as the cat surfaced. “That's as much as I can do now. Don't test me.”

She studied him, so tense the muscles along the side of his neck stood out as taut twin cords. Stepping back, she let him stand in front of her, waiting for Stephie to come to her.

Marcus appeared at the edge of the clearing, following more slowly. His face frozen in a blank mask instead of the dynamic countenance he'd had earlier.

"Mac! Oh Mac!" Stephie sobbed, finally having crossed the meadow. She rushed up to the front of the porch and stumbled across the steps.

The stumble saved her. The low growl had built into a very loud, very aggressive warning from Adam. Mackenzie realized if Stephie had rushed her, he might have snapped.

"Stephie, are you okay? Stay where you are." Mac pushed past him to help her friend stand, hoping it would give him time to rein in the dangerous aggression coming off him in waves.

Stephie fastened on Mackenzie with tear-bright eyes. "You're here. You're really here."

She threw her arms around Mackenzie and burst into a torrent of tears and wailing. Mackenzie winced, the sound piercing her sensitive shapeshifter ears. Adam gripped her shoulder and pulled her backwards out of Stephie's arms, causing Stephie to fall to her knees again with a yelp. She looked up at Adam with a slack mouth and eyes wide in shock.

"Too loud." He bit off the words.

"Adam," she hushed him from behind his protective arm. This wasn't the man she knew. She turned to Stephie as best she could, Adam's hold preventing her from approaching Stephie again. "It wasn't on purpose, how would she know?" To Stephie, she pitched her voice as calmly as possible. "Stephie, this is Adam. He's a Sentinel with the River Gap Pride."

Shock had worn off Stephie's face. Setting fantastic green eyes on him framed in long, bronze lashes, she gave a trembling smile instead. "P-leased to meet you."

The lack of sincerity in her voice tweaked at even Mackenzie's untrained ear and Stephie's scent came across the intervening space as sour miasma of fear and something darker, like the sickly sweet smell of rotting fruit.

"You didn't have to yank her away." Stephie pouted. "I've been through the worst experience and I haven't seen Mac in forever. She's my best friend."

"You're a danger." He spared no pity for her.

"Adam!" Mackenzie turned to him, anger burning from low in her chest and stirring up a growl of her own. There might be something off, but Stephie was her friend.

"He's right." Marcus interjected in a cold, flat voice as he came up behind Stephie. She squeaked and scrambled to one side until her back hit the railing on the steps of the porch. "She's a completely untrained shapeshifter, Mackenzie. She has less control than even you do."

"No." She took in Stephie's tear streaked face with growing horror.

"Her scent gives her away." Marcus stood with his arms crossed, looking at Stephie. Cold and implacable, he gave no sign of the stern but open man Mackenzie had met a short time ago.

She tried to sympathize. "Oh, Stephie, I'm so sorry. I thought, I hoped, he hadn't managed to Change you."

Stephie started shaking, tears streaming down her cheeks as she wrapped her arms around herself and rocked. "Change? Is that what you call this? I'm a freak."

Mackenzie felt Adam stiffen. She tried to go to Stephie again, but Adam wouldn't allow it.

She fell to her knees to meet Stephie eye to eye instead. With everything she had, she projected her voice to calm and soothe. "You're safe now. The pride here will help you, if you ask. They're helping me."

"You're not a freak!" Her friend sounded angry, but the way she said it seemed off. "He didn't mark you up and take you as his."

"I'm not his." She agreed, and Adam seemed to ease a tiny bit at those words. "But Van did Change me. He did it without my consent and he's here, hunting me. This is the safest place for you, Stephie, because the River Gap Sentinels won't let him have either of us."

"Changed you?" Stephie's delicately arched brows drew together in puzzlement. "Did he?"

Adam stooped and pulled Mackenzie back up, unable to allow her so close to the other girl. Even if she hadn't heard the anger in her friend's voice, he couldn't help but smell the girl's rage.

And he didn't think it was for Mackenzie's sake.

He caught Marcus' eye and the two came to a silent agreement.

"Stephie will stay here." Marcus made it an order, not a suggestion. "I'll assign a Sentinel directly to her."

"To instruct her?" Mackenzie had focused on helping her friend, watching her, listening to her, oblivious to his attempts to catch her attention.

He wanted to reach out and shake her, make her recognize the malice directed towards her.

Marcus' eyes softened for Mackenzie and his voice became a shade gentler. "To guard her and instruct her, if she'll take instruction."

The puzzlement in those deep brown eyes tipped Adam over the edge. He caught her up in his arms and gripped her firmly against his chest as she squeaked and tried to struggle out of his hold. "You're coming back with me."

"She's going where?" Stephie's voice rose in volume and pitch to piercing levels again. "You can't just take her! Don't leave me here! What kind of barbarians are you?"

Mackenzie clamped her hands over her ears against the aural assault.

"The kind who won't let you hurt her." He turned cold, his words concise. "Control yourself."

For the second time in the night, Mackenzie truly felt Adam's power roll across her skin. Liquid lightning flowed over her, tingling as it passed. Stephie whimpered and quieted, glaring at her with sullen eyes.

Before she could say anything, Adam turned away with her in his arms and started running. The trees swept past them in a blur and she caught the sense he hadn't taken a direct route back to his lair. Twice, he changed direction and Mackenzie caught the scents of one or the other of the two Sentinels. She'd improved at catching scents of individuals but she still struggled with the nuances indicating moods. Adam's musk filled her nose, and she could smell his lingering aggression but couldn't decipher the

other hints in his scent. Of course, moving as quickly as they were, the air whizzed past them stealing away the scents before she could really register them.

“Hold on.” He murmured finally, and she threw her arms around his neck as his legs gathered under them and launched them upward. Another jump and he carried her through the sliding glass door on the second level of his home again.

She wiggled immediately, but Adam strode to the couch first before he let her down. He stared down at her with an inscrutable look for a long moment before he turned away.

“Why did you take me away?” She shifted on the couch to watch him walk into the bedroom area.

“Because she hurt you.” He answered from out of sight. He must be rummaging in a closet or something based on the sounds and to Mackenzie, he still sounded angry.

“She's afraid.” He had been insensitive, which differed from what she knew about him. “And now she's alone with strangers. She called me, came here, and you bundled me up like some infant and rushed me away.”

He returned from the bedroom carrying fabric in one hand, his eyes almost glowing with temper, his cat still very close to the surface. “You don't get it, do you? You're too new.”

“Get what?”

“There's something wrong with her. Her reactions to you were all wrong. My cat tells me she's a danger, and I won't let anything harm you.” He froze there, a few steps away, staring down at her with an intensity squeezing a place deep inside her chest.

“She's been through something awful, Adam.” She tried to reason with him. “She's not herself. But when she's had a chance to calm down, to pull it together, you'll get to know her. She's always been a good friend.”

And a touch of guilt whispered through her heart. Disturbed, she pulled her knees to her chest and rested her chin on top of them.

“What is it, kitten?” Suddenly there, he kneeled down beside the couch, his body heat inches away and still seeping into her skin.

“She's always been a good friend,” repeated Mackenzie. “And I always admired her.”



“And it’s a bad thing?” His handsome features quirked. He looked more like a cat considering some sort of odd, hoppy bug at the moment than any other time since she'd met him.

She laughed, as much at his expression as at herself. “I'm...shallow, I guess. And I'm insecure.” The admission galled her to say out loud.

“How?” He sounded genuinely confused.

She lifted her head and looked at him in consternation. “How not? She's beautiful. She's athletic and capable, confident and sexy. She's definitely sexy.”

He snorted.

“You can laugh if you want, but I try sexy and I make an idiot of myself.” Both of them knew the exact moment she referred to. Before he could do more than open his mouth, she pressed on. “We were always together in school. And trust me when I say, despite how much people said we were a pair, it became obvious which of us managed be the more interesting.”

Adam waited and she scowled at him.

“Fine.” She spit out the rest. “A tiny little part of me cringed when she came running all gorgeous across the meadow, because I figured you'd find her more attractive. Maybe you wouldn't have decided she was too much of a kid for you.”

Tears welled up hot in her eyes, and Mackenzie tasted shame as she choked on her confession. “I thought shallow, pathetic stuff when the real priority is obvious. Stephe’s a victim like me. She deserves the same help, the same kindness you've all shown me. What kind of a person am I?”

Too disgusted with herself to speak any further, she balled her hands into fists so he wouldn't see her claws threatening to break through her finger tips. She bit her lip and refused to look at him, hating to see disappointment in his handsome face, or worse, pity.

Struck speechless, Adam could only sit in awe of the amazing heart beating inside such a shining soul. She stayed so brutally honest, her light shone on any person and

bared them for what they truly were. Of all people, she remained hardest on herself, when her heart forgave everyone else their sins.

Her distress pulled at him, his cat wanting to curl around her and give comfort, protecting her from whatever caused it.

Carefully, so carefully, he cupped her face in his hands and made her look at him. "Kitten, you are a warm, intelligent, fallible person with a heart way too big." Her eyes glimmered bright with tears. He brushed them away with his thumbs as he continued. "You're so busy seeing the good in people. I'm going to have to make up for how you don't seem to see the good in you."

Twisting her mouth in disbelief, and she tried to pull away, but he refused to let her go. "Do you know what I saw in your friend? I saw a hurting woman who knew she hurt those around her. She used her misery to cause others pain with deliberate intent."

"Stephie wouldn't..." she began, but Adam hushed her.

"She wasn't happy to find out you'd been Changed."

"Of course not..." she started, but this time he pressed a thumb firmly over those plump lips.

"She wasn't concerned for your sake, Kitten." He insisted. "Oh, the news angered her, and she wasn't angry for your sake either. Her scent, her posture, the look in her eyes...she was jealous, insanely jealous. What she projected could be hazardous to your health."

She shook her head, but didn't speak with the distraction of his thumb. He lightened the pressure and brushed his thumb across her lower lip instead. His groin tightened as he enjoyed the way her lips parted slightly at his touch.

Suddenly, those straight white teeth flashed and nipped his thumb firmly before she pulled her face out of his hands.

"Focus," she snapped, but her cheeks flushed hot, and he could smell her sweet scent, holding the spicy hint of arousal.

"Trust me, Kitten, I'm focused." He drawled, full of feline arrogance. Finally, he let his choke hold on his cat loose a notch.

Her eyes widened and blinked twice as she regarded him. He wondered if he had ever seen eyes so wide and so deeply stunning.

"I don't believe you," she said slowly, warily.

He instantly snarled. "I wouldn't lie to you."

"Okay, then." She took it back, changing tack. "Then you're misjudging her. Once you get to know her, you'll see she couldn't inflict that kind of hurt."

"She said herself she went with the male dating you." He resisted the impulse to shred something.

Her mouth dropped open. "How?" Realization dawned on her face. "You heard the whole conversation over the phone, and I didn't even think twice about it."

He sat back on his heels and folded his arms across his chest to keep himself from shaking sense into her. "She went behind your back and went with your male. What kind of friend does those things?"

"She said she thought I wasn't interested anymore, didn't she?" Mackenzie still fought, but he could hear the doubt. "My family didn't tell anyone why I left, otherwise, we wouldn't have had Devo wandering around here either."

"Here's something you can be sure of with any River Gap Pride male or female, Kitten. We might compete, we might Challenge, but we don't poach. It's not just wrong. It's a danger to the entire pride."

"Why?"

He sighed. Too many lessons in one night. "You know shapeshifters are capable of seriously damaging violence."

He watched her carefully, and though she paled beneath her gold-kissed skin, she nodded.

"And we react strongly—very strongly and emotionally," he continued. "When it comes to the mating dance, there would be bloodshed all over the place every time a female went into heat if it weren't for a set protocol."

"Protocol," she repeated, as if trying to absorb the word.

"Chryssa should be here to tell you this." But Chryssa wasn't there, no other females patrolled nearby who Mackenzie would trust, and he'd promised to teach her. "If a female is in heat, the other females take themselves out of her way. One dominant female in heat can accidentally set off other females, especially the inexperienced. It's dangerous to have too many females in heat at the same time. It'd drive the males

insane, cause bloodshed. If a female has focused her favors on a male, the other females stay away.”

“Wouldn't you be more worried about the males?” The wheels turning inside her head were almost visible as she struggled to understand.

“No male would intentionally hurt a female of his pride. Females are more dangerous to each other.” All youngsters learned the lesson earlier on, before hormones took over. “When females attack, there is no mercy.”

“Is it always the female's choice?”

He felt a headache coming on. “No. The choice is usually mutual. Males don't go into heat, but they are driven. When a male focuses on a female, he can stake a claim. The other males in the pride will back off until the female makes it clear whether she's decided to give her favors to the male or to turn him away.”

“And this mating dance, it's permanent?” She hesitated on the thought.

“Again, choice is mutual. The pair can choose a mating for a season or for a full turning of the seasons without permanently binding to each other. A lifetime commitment is bound by blood, flesh and ...something else.”

Her delicate eyebrows drew together in puzzlement. “Else?”

“You haven't shifted yet, kitten. But explain how a man can become a jaguar.”

“Magic,” breathed Mackenzie. Or nightmare, she thought, remembering the madness glittering in Van's black eyes as he partially shifted to rake claws into her flesh. No, it could be magic, Mackenzie insisted to herself. Other things made the magic something innocent and special, like jaguar kittens.

“I understand the scent on the wind, the dirt beneath my claws and the taste of my prey in my mouth.” He waxed unusually eloquent. “I don't understand what lets me be what I am, I accept it. But, those who make the bond permanent bind themselves with a touch of the magic that makes us what we are, and there is no turning away from it once it is done.”

A chill ran through Mackenzie.

“Bound by blood and by flesh too, you said.” She thought hard, her own inner cat restlessly stalking a stray memory inside her. A fragment, something about the night Van had Changed her.

“Yes.” Out of the corner of her eye she caught his sudden scrutiny of her face. She knew he must have seen something in her expression.

“Van.” Dismay rose in her throat like a scream, evolving into awful nausea as Mackenzie forced out words instead. “Van licked my blood when he...when he hurt me. He clawed his own arm and pressed it against my mouth. I could taste his blood...and mine...could taste them and tell the difference.”

Suddenly Adam had her upper arms in twin vice grips, his eyes completely cat. “Did he feed you any of his flesh? Did he eat yours?”

“N-no, I don't know.” She cried out in panic. “I couldn't swallow by then, almost unconscious. He didn't feed me anything, but I don't know if he took mine.”

“There would be a scar.” He started to lift her shirt hem. “The wound wouldn't heal without a scar if he took your flesh for a permanent mating bond.”

“S-stop!” She struggled with him. “Wouldn't I know?”

“I won't hurt you.” Adam wouldn't be denied, his voice grim. “But, we need to know, Kitten. He could call you right out of the lair if you fell asleep or if you let your attention wander. You're too new to recognize the bond separate from all the other new things.”

Whimpering, more afraid of Van than of Adam, she uncurled from her place on the couch and stood up. With those gentle hands, he lifted her shirt away from her, tossing it to the floor, and examined her upper body. Her pants followed. It took every ounce of will she had to stand instead of run.

She shivered, not from cold, but from the heat of Adam's scrutiny as he examined every inch of her skin. He turned her away from him and undid her bra, examining her back and sliding her panties down to bare her behind before turning her to face him. Closing her eyes, Mackenzie couldn't look at him as he scrutinized every inch of her, completely bared for him to see.

“Shh.” His voice gruff but soothing in her ears. “It's okay, Kitten. It'll be okay, let your arms down.”

Trembling, she let her arms fall to her sides. Adam took her hands and placed them on his shoulders, anchoring her as he completed his inspection.

“No scars. He didn't take your flesh.” She could hear the relief in Adam's voice. Suddenly, his heat surrounded her as he wrapped the strength of his arms around her. She pressed her face against his chest, and she could feel the anxious pounding of his heartbeat. Her skin cooled where he dropped one arm and reached behind him. “Here, Kitten, you can wear this to sleep.”

Soft fabric pressed against her until she took it into her hands. He stepped away from her slowly, reluctance in every line of his body as he turned his back to give back her privacy.

She looked down at the fabric in her hands and found a well-worn T-shirt. She pulled it over her head, drawing comfort from the softness of the fabric and his scent. His shirt hit her right below mid thigh, covering her.

“I didn't have time to go to the cabin and get your clothes.” He apologized over his shoulder. “I thought it would be more comfortable.”

“Thank you.” Too much had happened and the fear remained. “What happens next? What can Van do to me?”

“It's not a full bond.” He turned back to her, gathering up her clothes. He gave her a light nudge to sit on the couch, but after taking a good look at her, he sat instead and gathered her into his lap. It wasn't sexual, more the comfort of physical contact. “Exchanging blood gives him a connection to you. It probably explains how he found you so quickly. With training, you should be able to find him too.”

“It would help you, wouldn't it.” She wanted to hope there could be some good to come out of it.

“Yes, maybe. I wouldn't ask you to do anything to risk yourself though.” He tucked her head under his chin and amended his statement. “I wouldn't *let* you do anything to risk yourself.”

“Is it permanent?” Curled up in the safety of his arms, she dared hoped things were better than they seemed.

"I don't know." He ran one hand across her back in soothing circles. "I've never initiated a bond, and every bond I know of was completed fully and by choice. It shouldn't be permanent without the full exchange."

The fear seeped back, a cold thing creeping across her skin and into her heart. "So he might always be able to find me."

"But he'll never get to you, Kitten." He gave her the promise. "Never."

She hid from the fear in the nest of his arms, letting his heartbeat soothe and scent wrap her in safety. Outside, the rain began to fall, a new sound for her. The city apartment where she lived before had been too insulated to hear the rain. The rhythmic percussion against the roof of his home lulled her into a sense of calm. She finally gave in to exhaustion and let herself fall into the warmth around her.

## Chapter 9

She didn't sleep peacefully, hadn't since the attack. Darkness suffocated her as whispered words of love and violence circled in her mind. Eyes darker than the night burned with passion, and insanity, watching her.

She struggled to escape, but hands caught her, held her down. Fingertips dug into her skin, marking her, sharpening into claws. Those claws pierced her, parting her flesh in a searing violation.

She called out. She hadn't had a name to call out before, but she did this time.

“Adam!”

The hands holding her down released her and those burning black eyes faded into the night. A different touch whispered across her skin.

She shivered with the unexpected pleasure of it and gasped. The darkness around her lightened, and when she breathed, she could smell open forest and trees kissed by fresh morning dew.

Gentle hands soothed her tortured skin, a healing balm of touch and energy. The words reached her, comforting, promising safety. Lips pressed against the inside of her wrist, causing her pulse to quicken.

She dreamt, she knew, but for the first time in forever, she didn't want to wake.

Those hands explored, passing over her flat belly and wandering lightly over the rise of her breasts. Slowly, they woke a different kind of heat in her. They found sensitive places along her arms and the backs of her legs, teasing her with feather light strokes. She writhed a little, arching her back to press her body into those palms.

A low voice hushed her gently, those hands slowing, bringing her back down from the rising tide of desire. The words whispered were promises of pleasure later—for the time being, she needed to sleep.

Daylight came slowly into the forests of River Gap territory, filtering through the leaves and gradually dispelling the mist from the shadows.

Mackenzie woke slowly too, breathing in the scents around her as she turned on her back and stretched luxuriously in the satin softness of the sheets. The down comforter



felt like a warm cloud, as did the feather pillows. Her cat loved the feel of the bedding and loved a good stretch even more. Her nightmare barely echoed in her mind and she felt well rested, another first.

Enjoying the novelty, it took a good couple of minutes for her to realize she lay in someone else's bed and sure as heck wasn't in the bed at the guest house.

Her eyes shot open fully and peering up through a canopy of tree leaves to the dawn streaked sky. She froze. A huge cat lay perched on a large branch stretching over the bed, actually, the bedroom. It took another minute or so for her eyes to pick out the transparent plasteel frame of the skylight.

"Adam." Her voice came out as a whisper, but his ears twitched, letting her know he heard. The jaguar stood in perfect balance on the big branch and took his time about stretching.

She could have sworn she saw humor glinting in those golden eyes.

He leaped down through the skylight, a streak of shadow passing through the sunlight, and landed a few feet from the foot of the bed with pure feline grace.

She snapped her mouth shut and searched for something to say. "It's going to take me forever to get used to these see-through walls and ceilings."

In cat form, he obviously couldn't answer her, but he sat back on his haunches and began to clean his shoulder as much as to shrug and say she'd get over it.

She watched the way his muscles slid under the sleek fur. The backdrop of his coat was a brown so dark to be almost black, his markings true black. Beyond color, his coat looked different from the kitten she'd held the night before and Mackenzie wanted to touch and feel the difference.

He left off his grooming and stared at her with gentle eyes. He stood slowly and padded to the bedside, coming within arm's reach as if he'd read her mind.

He waited. Mackenzie guessed he didn't want to frighten her, but probably knew she wasn't because of her scent.

She reached out a hand, but it froze an inch short of his shoulder. Images of wicked claws shot through her mind. She knew what those claws felt like, ripping her skin. But Van's coat had been a dark tawny orange, not this burnished black on black. She could do this, do this and learn to deal.

Fear was a reality. No escaping it after what she'd survived. But, a person could learn to work through and still function.

So ,she reached out the rest of the way, first grazing his shoulder with fingertips. His outer coat was silken with a little more solid texture to each hair than the kitten had. Then she plunged her fingers fully into his thick coat and reveled in the softness beneath the outer guard hairs.

A rumbling began, originating in his wide chest and resonating through his shoulder into her hand. His eyes half shut and he rested his chin on the bed beside her.

“You like to be petted,” She accused him, giving him a little shove. “And here I thought you did this to help me get past trauma.”

The big cat turned his head an inch without lifting it off the comforter, and she saw the surprising pink of his tongue peek out.

“Hah.” Despite her best effort, a smile stretched her mouth and a bubbly feeling rose up, escaping as a soft giggle. “You big kitty.”

She let her fingers continue to wander through his fur until they found the base of one ear. She paused there, massaging gently and he rewarded her with even louder purring.

“So what happens if you Change?” She'd been curious about how it worked. “Do you still have ...clothes..?”

He answered her literally. One minute there had been a large jaguar under her fingers and the next a large man stood by the bedside.

Naked.

Mackenzie knew her eyes were wide open. Well, he hadn't completely answered her question. “So... do clothes disappear during the Change or does it mean you stripped before you Changed?”

“Yes.” He watched her with eyes the color of molten gold, drawing her in. Okay, and the rest of him was pretty impressive too. He had well-defined muscles in all the right places. Other assets were looking like they had a whole heck of a lot of potential, too.

Dropping her eyes to the sheets, she cleared her throat. “Yes to which?”

“Yes, clothes disappear during the Change, and yes, I stripped before the Change.” He clarified for her before turning to a closet built into one of the interior walls, taking

his time about it. "There's no point wasting clothes, so I strip down before I Change if there's time. Otherwise, the clothing disappears and doesn't come back."

Catching up, heat finally rose in her cheeks as he presented her with his very well-shaped back end. He had incredibly broad shoulders too. Like a reverse peep show, she watched him dress and it still had a pretty strong affect on her.

"So, nudity isn't a taboo out here, is it?" She tried to ignore the arousal she knew he could smell from her.

"It depends." He turned to face her with a pair of jeans on. "We keep a lot of clothing stashed in all of the cabins, like the one your friend is staying in right now. We also keep clothing stashed all around town. There's no real reason to be walking around naked. It's not considered appropriate in public areas like the town."

"Oh." She barely managed a whisper, completely distracted by Adam standing there half dressed, the morning sun playing across his muscular torso. A soft, almost invisible dusting of dark hair made a V across his chest and trailed off at his defined abdomen. It picked up again below his belly button and led the way to other things, now hidden by his jeans. Well, sort of hidden. His interest filled out those jeans pretty thoroughly, the pink tip of his cock peeking out of his waist band where it sat low on his hips.

Adam gave her a slow, lazy smile when she forced her eyes back up to his face, waiting to continue until he had her attention back on the conversation. She blushed hotter. "Between family and close friends, or between lovers," Adam's voice became husky and his expression very smug, "nudity is pretty common."

"Oh." She squeaked.

He crossed the room then, leaning over her where she still sat curled up in the bedding. "I figured since you're only half dressed, Kitten, I'd do the same."

She opened her mouth to retort, but realized she had nothing. Still dressed in his t-shirt, she wore little else. She'd been about to ask what this thing was between them, but his ploy warned her away. They were still finding out, and he had let her know he'd take his cue from her.

Fascinated by the potential, she bit her lower lip.

Adam almost groaned, fixated on her utterly kissable mouth. His cat had fun, pleased there had been only the one spike of fear. She had reacted better than he'd hoped for when he'd taken the risk of letting her wake up to him in his jaguar form. Being a panther variant of the species, he'd worried his form would trigger worse nightmares.

Everything about her called to him, her arousal a sweet and heady signal hanging in the air around him. Curled up in his bed wearing only his t-shirt, wrapped in his scent, it was almost enough for his beast.

Almost.

Those dark, dark brown eyes searched his and hunger awakened in them. He felt his own desire grow even harder in response and soon his cock strained at his jeans. Clenching the bed covers, he held steady and waited for her.

He was going to go at her pace, damn it.

She reached out a hand and those gentle fingertips traced a line of burning heat from his jaw to his collar bone.

For his cat, she'd given signal enough, and he lunged forward, claiming her mouth. He would have tried to pull the jaguar under control, but her arms wrapped around his neck, her hands burying themselves in his hair.

He braced his weight on one arm as he explored her sweet curves with his other hand. She gasped into his mouth as his hand slid along her waist and over her hip. As she returned his kiss, her tongue dancing with his, she pressed her breasts into his chest.

"Kitten." He struggled to keep some part of his brain thinking. "You need to tell me when it's too much."

She pressed kisses into his jaw.

"If you don't..."

His kitten growled at him and nipped his ear.

Growling back, he buried his free hand into her hair and held her firmly so she had to look him in the eye. He kept his hold firm enough so if she turned her head it would hurt, in a good way.

Those wide eyes regarded him for a minute, glazed with desire, and she started to speak.

His cell phone rang from the night stand.

They both froze, breathless, and then Mackenzie turned into a bundle of giggles as she hid under the down comforter.

"There has got to be a special kind of hell for people who interrupt moments like this," Adam muttered as he climbed off the bed, strode out of the room, and answered his damned phone. "Yeah."

"The stray's girl is asking for Big Mac." Not a morning person at the best of times, Marcus seemed to be in a particularly bad mood. "I left Aaron with her, and she's giving him all sorts of grief."

"She's a danger to Mackenzie." Adam wouldn't allow danger anywhere near her.

"Agreed. But I got the impression Big Mac wanted to see her friend." Bad mood or no, Marcus remained logical. "Big Mac is no submissive. She will find her way out on her own to see her friend if you don't take her yourself. Better if you don't make her slip your guard."

"She couldn't." Feline arrogance took hold. Adam let it fill his voice, clenching his jaw and expanding his chest.

"Don't make her try," Marcus shot back at Adam. "It'd suck for both of you."

He fell silent, considering.

"See if you can find out more about the new girl's Change." Marcus added his other concern, "There's something off about her story."

"All right," Adam agreed, thinking it over. "But, I need you to send another Enforcer patrol in too. Looks like the stray had some of Mackenzie's blood and made her take some of his in return." And that was more than just a thorn under his skin, it was a continual cut at his temper.

"He mated her?" Marcus' voice sharpened exponentially.

"Not that I can tell - no scar." There were no words for the relief Adam felt. It must have taken incredible courage and a huge leap of faith for Mackenzie to let him check her for the scar. "But, I'm guessing he can locate her with what connection he did create."

A pause. "One thing at a time. Check the girl's story for holes. I'll take care of the additional guard. We can focus the search better since we know he isn't blundering around trying to lock down her location. He's homing in on her."

"You got it."

Marcus ended the call, and Adam slipped the offending cell phone back into the pocket of his jeans.

His eyes fell on a couple of packages sitting on the kitchen counter. He grabbed one with a plan in mind before he headed back into the bedroom, his jaguar under firm control.

Mackenzie watched Adam return with a completely different attitude. It must have been the call. Being honest with herself, she had to admit it had been both timely and incredibly frustrating.

They'd been moving too fast, but she'd been swept away. Without all of his light and easy-going facades, his intensity drew her in irresistibly.

She hadn't been alone either. The look on Adam's face had been priceless. The sudden release in tension and the expression of frustration had set loose the butterflies trapped inside her.

Recovered from her giggle fit, she basked in the effervescent mood it left behind. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt the tickling sensation in her diaphragm, a bubbling joy gone too long.

"Your friend is asking for you." He spoke in a brisk tone as he walked back into the room. "I guess we'll go see her, if she can keep herself under control."

She burst out of the bedding, bracing on her knees at the end of the bed. "Really?"

He looked her up and down with one eyebrow raised. "Like bouncing on beds, Kitten?"

The bed hadn't been the only thing bouncing. The tee had been woven of very comfortable, thin material. Narrowing her eyes at him, she crossed her arms over her chest and sat back on her heels.

Chuckling, he put the package he'd been holding on the bed next to her. "Someone went to the guest house and retrieved most of your stuff. I figured you'd want to wear your own clothes out."

"Underwear would be a good thing." She tightened her arms across her chest. His eyes fell on the curve of her breasts under his T-shirt, as she intended. "Wouldn't want to be bouncing around causing anyone any issues."

Okay, a little bit of gratification felt good when he had to visibly tear his eyes away to respond to her. "Friends, family and lovers," he reminded her, his voice dropping to a deeper tone on the last word.

She blushed despite herself.

They were on their way in under half an hour. Mackenzie had made use of Adam's shower and fallen in love with the multiple shower heads. The gorgeous, perfectly solid and not transparent, stone tiles made her very happy. It still had the natural feel of the rest of the house, but maintained absolute privacy.

A matching tub for soaking had been built in as well and Mackenzie thought it had water jets in the sides. She had no doubt the tub was designed to be big enough for at least two people. She tried to ignore the insistent vision of two people in particular sharing the tub. But candles could easily be placed along the edge and scented oils added to the water. It had the depth to allow two people to lay neck deep and a broad enough ledge to support a little fun half in and out of the water. The possibilities danced through her mind and she wondered if she should take another quick, cold shower to wash away the scent of arousal.

So, her mind lingered on baths and luxurious tubs as they descended from Adam's aerie. When he bent to lift her in his arms again, she started out of her reverie.

He arched an eyebrow. "It's safer for me to carry you than for you to walk out of here and leave a scent trail."

"Sorry." She dropped her eyes away from his, suddenly shy. "I know. I had other things on my mind."

A moment of consideration. "We don't have to go if you don't want to."

Shaking her head, she clarified. "I do want to go, I do. I'm having trouble keeping my mind on serious things right about now is all."

Palming away a few errant strands from her cheek, he placed a sympathetic kiss to the cheek. "You've been thinking heavy for a couple of days straight and you've had a lot of hurdles to face. You know what I'm going to help you do?"

"What?" Suspicion colored her voice as she watched him through narrowed eyes. Mischief sparked on his face and she sensed an incoming punch line.

He scooped her up easily in the cradle of his arms. "Get over them." And he'd delivered.

"Hah." Okay, he'd gotten a laugh out of her, a little one. "Hurdles aren't on my mind right now. I've got other things going on upstairs."

Like the fleeting thought of an old storybook about a princess. The other times he'd held her, he hadn't given her time to think about it, but she couldn't help feeling swept off her feet and she sort of wished he'd carry her back up to his palace and do a few naughty things involving that huge bath.

He'd been watching her as the thoughts ran through her head. "Anything interesting, Kitten?"

Nope, not telling him she'd been fantasizing about his bathtub. She changed the subject. "How do you know what path to follow?"

"You found your way to town fine yesterday. A shifter gets familiar with its surroundings."

"But, you take a different path every time, coming or going. I don't think I could find my way from town to your home on my own."

He strode along confidently, pausing here and there to taste the air and hop over streams or deliberately walk in them. She did her best to hold still in his arms, knowing extra motion would spread her scent around and let it fall to the ground. He'd explained it to her the first time he'd carried her to the cabin.

"It's a safety precaution to take different routes in and out of private places." He had dropped his voice to barely audible, his words only for her ears. "You'll get familiar with the paths soon enough and maybe make up a few of your own."



"How do you hide your trail?" Taking his cue, she spoke as softly as she could. "I can see some of it in the way you're going, but I don't get all of it."

He grinned at her. "We'll play a couple of hide and seek games once you get more used to what you can do. Mostly, Sentinels and Enforcers learn to hide their own trail as part of training."

"If you learn to hide it, can one of you find the other?"

"The hide and seek games help there," he replied. "Keeps our skills sharp."

She noticed he hadn't answered her question. Her mind took another intuitive step. "That's why you can't find Van. He's hiding his trail from you all. He only leaves his scent where he wants to on purpose."

Adam's face became serious, but he kept moving. She pretended not to notice he'd gripped her tighter to his chest.

They approached the cabin from behind, avoiding the clearing all together. He didn't put her down until they reached the front steps and traded manly nods with Aaron, a handsome young man with reddish-brown hair falling to one side, big brown eyes and a lopsided grin. He seemed to have a sore throat as he greeted Mackenzie.

"Actually," and he cleared his throat yet again, "your friend, Stephe, wants to talk to Adam first. Says she wants to know what she needs to do to make sure he doesn't take you away again."

She brightened as she beamed at Adam. "Promising. See? She wants to make sure to do things your way."

His dubious expression spoke volumes, but he entered the cabin without a complaint or wise crack.

All smiles, she sat down on the porch steps to wait.

Adam stepped inside and immediately, his jaguar snapped to alertness. Something about the female's scent, a ripening musk, irritated him.

"Hello." Stephe sat on the kitchen counter. "I'm glad you came."

The girl wore a halter top and shorts, the bright splash of fuchsia from her bra peeking from the keyhole of the top. She waited there, far too comfortable, for someone who had so recently been traumatized and called Mackenzie for help.

He folded his arms across his chest. "Aaron says you wanted to know what precautions you need to take so I don't remove Mackenzie from harm's way again."

"Well, how will I know if you don't tell me?" Her head cocked to one side the same way Mackenzie's did. It didn't look as natural when Stephie did it.

She hopped down from the counter and approached, gazing up at him through heavy bronze lashes. Her top's keyhole showed off cleavage and the splash of color from the bra drew his eye. She stopped within arm's reach, close enough for him to get a very good view.

"So, no shouting." Stephie's voice lilted in an almost sing song way. "No sudden moves, because it excites the beast in you, doesn't it?"

A growl rose up in his throat as she leaned closer. Her fingers toyed with the ties to her halter top and the knot came undone. Her scent was cloying; an adult female's musk hanging in the air. His jaguar rose quickly to the surface, irritated and suspicious.

She licked her lips in a slow, deliberate act. "No touching? I'm not allowed to touch Mackenzie even though you do? Wouldn't you want to let us touch?"

Too much sex in her voice, too many unspoken invitations. Her nipples stood out, easily visible through the thin fabric of her bra and shirt. His cat didn't trust the signals she broadcast with premeditated skill.

She hadn't lied yet, he would have smelled a lie in her scent, but as he thought through what she'd said, he realized she'd been very strategic with her truths.

"Back off," he growled.

She pouted. "But, I'm really new. Aaron said new shapeshifters have trouble with their hormones. It's why you're assigned to Mackenzie. She has trouble with them too, right?"

"Mackenzie is learning to be a shapeshifter. I'm her trainer." He watched Stephie carefully, but not for the reason she wanted. Her skin had taken on a ruddy color, eyes almost fever bright. His jaguar had been trying to tell him since he entered the room, the girl had gone into heat.

“What are you teaching her?” Those green eyes narrowed and then widened in alarm. “Are you forcing her? Are you taking advantage of her? What kind of teacher are you?”

Every question had gotten louder and more alarmed. He cursed when Mackenzie rushed through the door.

“What's wrong?” She looked from him to Stephie. “Stephie, Adam wouldn't ever take advantage. He's a good man.”

She'd come through the door to defend him, not her friend. Relief washed through him even though he hadn't known he'd been concerned. And then Mackenzie really looked at Stephie. Her nostrils flared as she took in the musk saturating the air inside the cabin, dark eyes dilating even as the edges lightened to gold. His jaguar yowled as she absorbed it, her expression changing.

“Damn! Aaron! Get in here!”

Adam grabbed Mackenzie and tossed her over his shoulder without ceremony, getting out of the cabin. But Mackenzie proved an unwilling bundle. She flailed and kicked, then managed to get leverage with her feet on the support column for the porch. She shoved hard with both legs, knocking them both off balance and sending Adam tumbling backwards.

She rolled when they fell, taking a bump or two but managing to stay out of his grasp for a split second and shot right back into the cabin.

“Stephie, what are you doing?” Mackenzie asked, point blank.

“You!” Stephie's lovely face had contorted into an ugly grimace. “I could have any man of yours! I would have had him in a few more minutes. They can't resist when I'm like this!”

Aaron tried to block Stephie's line of sight without touching her, but she kept dodging to the right and left to glare at Mackenzie.

“You've got to be kidding.” Mackenzie didn't recognize the friend she'd known for years in the raving woman before her.

“Van loves me!” Stephie screamed. “He said I was the only one. He said I had to be like this for him to take me. And, there you are! How did you trick him into Changing you, you little...”

“Enough.” Adam's power rolled through the cabin, silencing Stephie. His hands fell like vice grips onto Mackenzie's shoulders.

Probably a good thing since she saw everything through a haze of red. Her heart beat in her ears so loud, she wondered how Adam couldn't hear it. Or maybe he could. She only knew in that one moment, she wanted to rip into Stephie.

Snarling sounded far away, but it took a moment before she realized it came from her. Funny, she decided she wasn't going to stop.

“Van lied.” She snapped, a tiny part of her cringing at how harsh she sounded. “He lied to us both. He Changed us both. When he Changed me, it was after I said 'No' over and over again.”

“Liar!” Stephie spat at her. “He only loved me. He wasn't lying. You'll see.”

“He lied.” Mac insisted, never wavering. “He told me he loved me, told me I was the only one. He made all the same commitments; he lied.”

Stephie laughed, the sound high-pitched and a little insane. “You're so naïve, Mackenzie. You're so gullible. Always the sweet one, the one everyone wanted to shelter. You can't handle the fact Van wanted a real woman. A woman who knows dating is more than just kisses.”

She turned to Adam, all haughty arrogance. Holding his gaze, Stephie's voice turned mocking as she pitched it higher. “Kisses are special.” She let out a sound of disgust. “Mackenzie thinks a real man can be satisfied with baby kisses. She's too immature to know how to really please a man, or what kind of pleasure satisfies a real woman.”

Mackenzie stared at her friend in disbelief. The bitterness, the hateful words, they weren't Stephie. The temperature of the air around her rose with her anger, and she clenched her hands into fists, but she'd waited too long—her claws broke past her fingertips.

“See?” Stephie laughed, turning to look down her nose at Mackenzie. “You can't even control yourself. You never did know how to make the best use of what you had.”

“This stops now.” Adam interrupted, barely sounding human. “Aaron, you keep that thing here. Tie her up if you have to. Whatever you do, don't bed her, no matter how bad the heat drives her.”

Aaron stretched his neck, popping a few vertebrae. “Not likely.”

Adam locked Mackenzie in a solid grip as he pulled her stumbling out of the cabin. When he threw her over his shoulder in a modified carry, he kept a hold of her arms and legs as he strode away into the woods listening to her imaginative string of curses.

She cursed better than most soldiers.

It almost made up for the trouble brewing. A couple of hours, the night at most, and the heat would take her. Driven by need, attracted to and threatened by every male around her, she might lose her sanity. Without help, she definitely would lose control, and Chryssa hadn't returned yet. The female healer wouldn't pose a threat, could have helped Mackenzie through safely. Without Chryssa, he'd have to do his best, for Mackenzie's sake.

He strode deep into the forest, away from the cabin and into his own territory. Once they were alone, he slid Mackenzie off his shoulder and back on her feet.

"Damn it, let me..." she hissed and spit, madder every moment.

He waited.

Without Stephe there to feed the flames, her temper blew over in the face of his calm, almost sad demeanor. She abandoned her line of thought after a few more curses and asked warily. "What?"

"This is going to suck, Kitten, and your friend knew it when she used it against you." His head ached. Anger still burned through his system, heating his blood, but weariness weighed in his heart. Mackenzie didn't need yet another blow.

"Used what?" Her eyes held a touch of fear.

"Heat. She got you close enough and got your temper close enough to the surface that she's brought you into heat right along with her," Adam said it quickly, airing the unpalatable truth.

"No." She turned her head left and right in slow denial. "Why wouldn't you have noticed earlier? There's got to be a mistake."

But her skin flushed darker than the usual rose and her scent carried the richly spiced touch of arousal. Mackenzie was coming into heat, slowly but inexorably.

"There's no way we can hide your scent with you in heat." He had to warn the Enforcers, step up the security even higher. "You're going to be crawling inside your skin."

"I don't want this." She hugged her arms. "I don't understand."

"We'll work through this."

She took a step or two back, away from him. "How? What are you going to do?"

He held out his hands and made a soothing noise. "Easy there, Kitten. Heat works itself out in more than one way. You have a choice."

She laughed, a sound with no joy in it. "Choice of who?"

He slashed the air with one hand in the negative. "You could hunt instead. If I stay in this form and you Change to cat, you won't be drawn to me sexually. You could redirect your drive into hunting, and I'll run with you on the hunt to guide you. You don't have to have sex."

She'd be trading one fear for another, Adam could see it in her eyes.

"It's the best choice I can give you, Kitten."

She fell silent for a moment. "Where does that leave us? There's something between us. We don't know what it is yet."

"This isn't going to rush us." He could wait. He wouldn't rush her with the heat driving her into his bed. "Once we get past this and resolve the issues with your friend and the stray, we're going to explore this thing between us. I promise, Kitten."

"Tell me what the heat will do." Her jaw set. She wouldn't run from the problem.

"It's going to last a couple of days. You're going to be aggressive and defensive and on edge."

"Sounds like PMS." She scowled.

"You'll also be turned on." He wasn't about to let her think it would be easy. "So turned on every male who comes near you will know. You'll crave touch, crave it more than food or water.

"Okay, there's something different." Mackenzie's eyes dilated.

He continued in a hurry. "The only way to satisfy the craving will be sex or the kill. You can fight it, but you'll be driven to one or the other."

“So, Change into the cat and run something down.” Mackenzie grimly considered the alternatives. “Or, stay human and stay with you.” Suddenly, *stay* took on a whole new meaning.

“It doesn't have to be me, Kitten,” he added, gently. “You have a choice there too.”

Temper flared and she bared her teeth at him. “I'm not some teen to go flaking off to some cute boy when I've got an itch to scratch. Deal with it.”

His cat stilled inside him, both man and beast waiting for her to say what she wanted.

She took a slow breath, letting go of her temper bit by bit as she exhaled. He'd never seen anyone else weigh the options, assessing so carefully, and decide so fast. “I'm going to go through this, in this form. I'll learn to Change when there isn't the heat to push me.”

He waited for the rest, every fiber of his being tuned to her, her scent already a heady drug surrounding him as those dark melted-chocolate eyes fixed on him.

“Stay with me.” She made the request in the softest of whispers. “Please.”

“Kitten.” He answered her in a husky voice as his body responded to her gentle request, but he had to repeat his warning. “You choose me...”

“I choose.”

Mackenzie put everything into those two words. Heat rose inside, her skin hot. Her clothes chafed skin as it became more sensitive by the second and her nipples tightened as she watched Adam absorb her answer.

He took a step toward her, moving slowly and giving her time to avoid him if she wanted to. Those wonderful amber eyes burned as they studied her. His musk surrounded her, made things tighten low in her belly. She'd been hungry for him for days and this new issue only sharpened it.

He reached out a hand to brush her cheek, his touch cooling. “Then I'll stay.”

Heat or no heat, he'd given her the freedom of a choice. She had control and her heart calmed with the choice, the cat inside her purring. What should have driven her

over the edge, she felt sure for the first time since Van had taken all choices away from her.

Steadying herself, she leaned into his touch, letting the cool relief of it soak into her skin. "What next?"

"Are you comfortable with my home?" His hand slid behind her neck, cradling her as he tilted her head to look up at him. His lips brushed her cheek.

She nodded, too focused on his body to say the words.

"Then we're going to spend the next couple of days in there." His other hand brushed along her side, along the curve of her hip, the outside of her arm, his touch drew a streak of cool with its passing. She burned even more in the wake of it.

"What about Van?" she gasped, a part of her still holding on to the danger out there. She trembled when Adam growled, not from fear but from arousal.

"You and me, Kitten, we'll focus on the heat." His voice barely audible. "We let the pride deal with the stray. And, if he gets past the pride, he deals with me."

And that, she understood, was a predator speaking.

Concern peeked through the haze of desire and Mackenzie opened her mouth to ask another question, but he settled his mouth over hers, effectively drowning out what she would have asked.

His lips pressed firm against hers, both his hands moving to cradle her face, thumbs brushing a cool trail along her jaw line. Words fled as she opened for him, her senses focusing sharply on the feel of every touch, every point of contact between them. His tongue danced inside her mouth, tasting her. Hungrily, Mackenzie fed on his tongue, his mouth, pressing herself against him as a tide of need washed over her. One kiss and wet desire soaked her panties.

"It only gets stronger from here, Kitten," Adam whispered against her mouth.

She uttered a low moan and gripped his sides as she reached for his mouth again. When he hesitated, waiting for her answer, she nipped his lower lip instead. Staring at him, she licked the same spot, sliding her hands over the corded muscle of his abs.

He growled, his chest rumbling against hers. She looked up into his eyes turned golden as his cat loomed over her. Keeping her eyes open and locked on his, she licked along the line of his collar bone.



He shifted his hands again, sliding one down her shoulder to her waist and the other tightened on the back of her neck. Each became a cooling tease, leaving her burning for more of his touch. His eyes locked on her, holding her still even as she strained to meld herself against him. One more second and she thought she might snarl in frustration, then Adam's hand tightened on the back of her neck and he kissed her again. He didn't wait for her to open for him this time. He pressed his way into her mouth, his tongue darting in and invading in strong sweeps. The depth of his kiss, the way he thoroughly explored her mouth, was a kind of claim.

And then he scooped her back into his arms, and carried her away.

## Chapter 10

"Damn." Marcus scowled out of the vid panel as Adam finished his update. "Where is she now?"

"She's here, taking a shower."

Marcus raised an eyebrow at Adam.

"I brought her here to be safe, Marcus." He moved to explain quickly. "Not to take her where she stands. She's going to take this at her pace."

"Easy there, pride brother." Marcus held up his hands. "I know you won't hurt her, and I know you won't take advantage of her, but do you know?"

And his alpha wouldn't hesitate to skin him alive if he did take advantage of her. Actually, Adam felt comforted by the knowledge. Miserable, he knew it showed in his eyes. "She's making the best of a crap situation."

"Your girl has a good head on her shoulders. She knows how to make a decision."

"I warned her," he murmured. "She knew what it meant if I claimed her."

Marcus nodded. "Noted. I'll let the pride know you've staked a claim. Do both of you a favor, Adam, and let the girl make her decision without fighting you any more than she already has."

"I think the stray sent the bitch on purpose." Marcus waited. Adam let his instinct guide his words as he continued. "She found Mackenzie too easily. The heat is too much of a coincidence."

"Makes your girl easy to find and makes it easier to control her. She's too off balance. If he had her in the heat then she wouldn't have known she had a choice." Marcus nodded in agreement. "Tough part will be figuring out the next move. If he manages to get Mackenzie away from the protection of the pride, her heat will drive her to accept him."

"The bitch is a chaos factor. We don't know what she'll try next. She doesn't want the stray to find Mackenzie, but she wants proof he wasn't telling her lies."

Marcus scowled. "She's a pain in the ass."

Adam nodded, but he thought of Mackenzie's soft heart. "Mackenzie says the girl believes what she says. We can't take the easy route when she's misguided."

Meaning the pride couldn't kill her for what she done thus far.

"She's a victim too." Marcus allowed the point. "Just too convinced what she believes is the truth."

They fell silent.

"All right." Marcus had come to a decision. "We'll keep her contained for now. So long as she doesn't represent a danger to the pride anymore, we'll send her off the territory after we catch the stray. I'll make some calls to find someone who might take her and help her. In the meantime, you focus on your girl. Let the –the rest of us focus on the stray."

Adam nodded. Given the choice, he might have made a different argument, but he had Mackenzie's heart to consider.

"But if the bitch poses a threat to any of the pride, Mackenzie included, she is dead." Marcus ended the call with the final judgment. Harsh, but predators surviving with other predators had to be.

"So that's the plan?"

Adam turned at the sound of Mackenzie's voice. She stood inside the doorway, dressed in nothing but one of his white dress shirts.

His cat stretched at the sight, happy she wore his things. He inhaled the scent of her wrapped in his own and his cock swelled almost painfully in his jeans. With an effort, he addressed her question.

"It's the way the pride works, Kitten."

Her expression solemn, she curled a lock of hair around one finger as she thought hard. "Stephie wasn't the person I used to know."

He nodded.

"Did the Change do it to her, or was it always there behind a facade?"

He could only give her the truth he knew for certain. "Did the Change twist you?"

The sadness in those beautiful eyes made him ache, but the hint of doubt moved him across the room to fill in the lonely space around her.

“Here’s what I think, Kitten.” He ran his hands along the outside of her shoulders. “I think every person meets their beast in a different way. Her beast twisted her. You and yours are finding a more natural balance.”

She looked away from him, her gaze casting about for something to latch onto as she considered what he'd said. Her eyes fell on the kitchen and she padded into it.

Adam watched her, filled with too many emotions, concern at the forefront. Betrayal by a friend gouged the soul. She felt things deeply, passionately and he admired the strength she had to match it. When faced with awful choices, she turned to constructive actions while she gathered her thoughts and took the time to really accept what couldn't be changed.

And beyond it all, his eyes followed the line of her sensual silhouette inside his shirt. She smelled of clean soap, but her arousal had begun to warm the air.

“I was thinking about maybe cooking some lunch.” Mackenzie began to putter around the kitchen.

Aware of the restlessness growing inside her, she let it drive her to move and keep her hands busy. Despite the temporary relief of the shower, her skin felt hot and tight again.

“Food is good.” She jumped when Adam crossed the distance from the vid panel to the kitchen on silent feet. His voice purred, low and dark behind her.

“Any preferences?”

“I had some cold roast in the fridge.” He brushed her upper arm as he reached past her to look in the refrigerator.

She struggled for coherent thought as the coolness of his proximity invaded the hot haze surrounding her, ratcheting the heat up a few notches. “I could warm up a few slices and make a spread for sandwiches.”

“Sounds good.”

Adam stood close enough to calm the need driving her. As she stepped around him, he let his hand brush her upper arms or lower back to give her the touch she craved.

He loved the feeling, standing there in the kitchen watching her cook. She'd sliced crusty torpedo rolls and arranged slices of the roast in them. Then she'd diced and sautéed onions and celery and spices, creating a hot and savory sauce she spooned over the top. In minutes, she'd put together a mouthwatering and hearty lunch.

"Want to eat at the counter or over at the table?" She asked him in a quiet voice. He knew she hadn't consciously leaned back into his shoulder. The heat from her skin seeped into his, stoking an inner fire, building steadily.

"Counter is fine." He gave in a little to temptation, dropping a kiss on her neck.

He reached his arms around her to take the plates from her hands and turned with her in the circle of his arms to the counter. After another light kiss, he backed away enough for her to slip around to the other side and hop up onto the stool.

He bit into the crusty bread, savoring the flavors of the roast and her sauce as he chewed.

"Delicious, Kitten."

She blushed. "It's a sandwich."

"You make any food more than just food. It's more than sustenance, it's...pleasure."

She bit her lower lip again and Adam reached out to run a thumb over the corner of her mouth.

"Crumbs?" Her eyes had begun to glaze, her voice a little breathless.

"Uh uh, a little sauce. I've got it." Adam slid his hand lower to grasp her chin and leaned in, licking the corner of her mouth ever so lightly. Then his tongue moved to her lower lip. When her mouth opened in a gasp, he took the unspoken invitation and kissed her.

So soft. Her scent surrounded him, filled his nose with an irresistibly intoxicating spice.

Adam eased back, knowing her hunger grew with the teasing contact but also careful to give her only enough to satisfy the craving for touch. He wasn't going to rush her beyond what she needed until she told him what she wanted.

"Finish your sandwich, cuteness."

She gave him a low growl before she tore into the rest of her sandwich.

Well, maybe the kiss had been a little more than she needed.

Aaron stood outside on the porch, listening to the cursing and hissing inside the cabin. The bitch was in a right smart snit over being shut inside with no outlet for the heat driving her. He might have pitied her if half of her ranting hadn't been pure, undiluted poison about Mackenzie in specific, and the pride in general.

A rustle came from somewhere nearby, and the sound of air being forced through some sort of engine, but before Aaron could look, something crashed inside the cabin.

He turned and opened the door, about to give her a verbal lashing for breaking things. Before he could speak, she gave an inhuman screech and charged him with claws fully extended from her hands.

Aaron had enough time to catch a wrist in each hand before searing pain struck him from behind and the world went dark.

"Van," Stephie whispered, her chest heaving as she leaned into him.

Van stood over the Sentinel's dead body, his olive skin glistening in the lamp light. Built compact and efficient, a natural predator, he stood a few inches taller than Stephie. Jet black hair swept back from a chiseled face and glittering black eyes set deeply into sunken sockets.

"You came for me." She pressed herself against him, her breasts aching.

Behind Van, the ominous shape of an armored humanoid moved up the steps and studied Aaron's corpse. "Specimen is a male, prime catch." The voice sounded metallic, as if digitized and projected through a speaker. "Trophy has been logged. You have five minutes to departure."

Van nodded acknowledgement and then focused on Stephie. "I promised you I would come." His knowing hands traveled over her, teasing and grasping. He owned her and his hands reaffirmed his claim.

"I knew it." She cried out as his hands pressed her close. The hard ridge of his arousal pressed against her. "I knew you loved me. It's not her, it's me. Only me."

"I love you." Van's voice agreed, low and rough. His hands became more insistent, and he pushed her farther into the cabin then kicked the door closed.

Her skin burned for him. His touch only made her burn hotter, an excruciating pain and somehow, she needed it even more.

"Where is Mackenzie, love?" he asked as his lips trailed rough kisses across her neck. Stephie frowned. "Why?"

His hands tightened on her, painful as she squirmed in his grip. One arm pinned her against him, his hips grinding into hers. He pinched a nipple between two fingers, twisting. Stephie gasped as hot, wet need gushed between her thighs.

"Where is Mackenzie?"

"Near," Stephie gasped, thrusting her hips forward helplessly. "Near. This cabin is right on the edge of his territory."

"The cat keeping watch over her?" Van asked. His grip eased a little and his mouth caressed her neck with hot kisses.

"Y-yes." Stephie's eyes closed in pleasure. "Adam. His name's Adam."

"Good girl," Van murmured.

Groaning, Stephie begged.

Van tumbled her to the floor, ripping off her pants before flipping her on her belly. Kicking her legs apart, he entered her in a harsh thrust. Stephie cried out, but Van only drew back and slammed into her again.

"Is this what you wanted?"

"Yes." She whimpered. "Oh, yes."

Grabbing a handful of her hair, he tugged her head back as he proceeded to give her what she needed, hard and fast.

"Is it hot in here, or is it just me?" Mackenzie fluffed her dark hair off her neck as she sat curled on a couple of cushions to one side of the fireplace. It remained unlit, so the stones of the hearth were slightly cool. She'd curled up nearby during the afternoon in a conscious effort to quit pacing.

"While you're definitely hot, Kitten. You're also probably running a fever."

She ignored the hint, too close to a pun. He'd been teasing her all afternoon, playing. When the heat had driven her to snap at him, he'd cooled her down with soft kisses and

gentle touches until she'd quivered under his touch. Oh, his kisses were anything but distant, but somehow he managed to lull her into a calm relief from the driving need the heat seemed to ignite inside her.

And then they'd part, and she would step away to regroup.

"My skin feels too tight." She fretted. "Maybe I need another shower."

He raised an eyebrow in amusement. "You've taken two more showers since lunch. Maybe you're a seal instead of a cat."

"Are there seal shifters?"

Adam nodded. "Sea lions, actually. There are leopard seals and grey seals, too."

"Must be incredible, swimming in the ocean."

"Well, Kitten." He chuckled. "Cats like water. We usually swim the river nearby."

"I've never seen the ocean though." She screwed up her face at his amused expression. "I haven't really seen running water. There are pools and amusement facilities in the city, but they're expensive. My family never went on a regular basis."

"Not the same." He shook his head in dismay. "Even with the salt-water chlorination systems, those facilities smell like chemicals to shifters. Swimming in the rivers where the water runs clear is a hundred times better, and the real ocean is salty but clean. You'd never mistake one of those man-made facilities for the real ocean."

"So you've been to the ocean?" She perked up, excited by the thought.

"It's not far." He grinned, pouncing on a point of interest beyond surviving the immediate threats. It meant she intended to stay, even if she hadn't consciously decided yet. "I could take you out there for a weekend trip with permission from the Sea Isle colony."

"Colony?" She drew her brows together as she puzzled over the name. Oh. "Seals."

Adam nodded. "Their territory reaches inland a little, but is mostly spread along the shores. They're more tolerant of other predators than most."

"Why is that?"

He shrugged again. "Seals are predators, but there are bigger mammals preying on seals. They're not at the top of their food chain. Could have something to do with it."



“So, are there shifters among those predators?” To Mackenzie, the idea chilled her. She couldn't imagine taking down and eating a sentient person, whatever form they could take.

“Not that I know of. There's no shifters registered with the Conservation that spend all of their time in the sea. The seal shifters split their time between land and sea.”

Mackenzie caught herself rubbing her hands against her upper arms as she considered the seals. She'd been snuggling her face into the cushions during their conversation too. Her skin not only felt too tight, it also craved the tactile sensation of soft things. Adam's cushions were covered in a soft micro-fiber, and she'd been trying for as much contact as she could get from them.

He had been watching her with knowing eyes, aware of it, too.

“Come here, Kitten.”

She gave him a long look before she gave up the safe spot on the cushion and sat on the floor as he'd indicated, in front of him. It surprised her, the effort it took to give him her back. The new awareness inside her, her cat, had to make the decision to give another predator her vulnerable side.

He waited for her to get comfortable. Of course, he understood what it cost her to give him the advantage of his position. After she had calmed a little, his hands settled gently on her shoulders. A shiver of delicious sensation shot through her muscles and up her neck.

After another moment, his hands began to smooth gently over her shoulders, sending soft waves of pleasure through her. His fingertips and thumbs began to knead the tension away with a sure, firm touch, easing away soreness she hadn't realized had gathered.

“Oh...”

“Good?” The question ended in a husky purr, melting things inside her as she relaxed into his hands.

“Mmm.”

Those clever fingertips found spots of tension, gently rolling the knots in her muscles and stretching them until they released. Then his fingers were lightly gliding over her heated skin until they found another tense knot and work their magic again.

“Relax, Kitten.” His voice caressed her every bit as much as his hands. “Touch is a part of what we are. It's okay to enjoy it.”

And, it didn't have to be sexual. She let the unspoken message sink in, and something deep inside relaxed.

His thumbs gently stroked in circular patterns on either side of her neck travelling upward until they pressed firmly into the base of her skull. Tingling spread upwards over the back of her head in a wave across her scalp, releasing a soft moan from her throat as her head nodded forward. Moments later, those clever, clever fingers found another spot behind her ears as his palms cradled her head, taking most of the weight from her neck.

Awash in sensation and the sheer pleasure of touch, Mackenzie let herself float in the relaxing feel he gave her.

“Hands good,” she murmured.

“I'll take that as a compliment.” His voice still low and rich, but amused.

She didn't bother to open her eyes. “Mmm.”

“Touch is the cornerstone of how we bond as a pride. It takes trust, gives comfort. And at times like this, you need it.”

She gave a soft groan of agreement? as his hands traveled back down her neck and began working on her larger muscles again, giving particular care to the junctures of her shoulder and neck.

Parts of her began to throb with desire. She wondered what those skilled hands could do in other places, imagined his firm grip on the muscles along the backs of her legs, on the curve of her behind, on the insides of her thighs.

She didn't want to think on it. She didn't want the need to drive her to it. Instead, she focused on the deep, sweet ache the pressure of his fingertips caused around her shoulders, leaving behind released tension and supple muscles.

She was aroused. She knew he could tell. But the touch he gave her was enough. Enough to take the edge off the craving, and let her relax, bracketed by his legs as his hands continued to feed her need.

“Adam?”

“Yes, Kitten?”

She loved his voice, loved the things it did to her. "Nothing. I wanted to hear you."

A low chuckle floated over her head. "That's a new one."

"Mmm."

The hungry flames inside her banked for the moment, she drifted into sleep under his hands.

Adam had almost lulled her into sleep. Another moment and he'd be able to settle her on the cushions and let her rest through at least some of the evening before the heat drove her into waking need again.

The vid-screen chimed. At the same time, a roar rolled through the night.

"Van!"

Mackenzie literally leaped out of his hands, her fear cutting sharply through the air.

It hadn't been the coughing roar of jaguars. The southern peninsula panther had gotten too close.

Adam would have ignored the vid-screen, but it chimed again. This time, it was the specific signature indicating an emergency call from Marcus.

"Easy, Kitten." He let his dominance roll over her fear. He didn't have the time to be subtle with her panic building and enraging his own beast. He gathered her in his arms first, gritting his teeth when she buried her head into the hollow of his shoulder and shuddered. Biting off a curse, he turned and answered the insistent vid-screen. "What?"

"The stray is either a genius or insane," Marcus stated, his image looking deadly grim.

"You find him?"

"Oh, we found him. On his terms, the bastard. You heard him. He's in the pride Circle. He's issued a formal Challenge."

Adam let the curses loose this time.

"We can't kill him outright," Marcus warned him. "According to Conservation guidance, we have to honor the formal Challenge. He's careful about the Challenge too. He didn't just issue a Challenge to the pride. He was specific. He's Challenged the right to claim Mackenzie."

“I'll kill him.” He tightened his grip on her. Such a short time and already she'd become so much to him. She'd slipped past his walls, and such an important part of his heart, he couldn't remember what life was like without her there.

“He's a smart cat,” continued Marcus. “He couldn't know you'd staked a claim. If there had been no claim, then there was potentially no one from the pride to meet his Challenge at all.”

## Chapter 11

Mackenzie's head shot up, her scent changing, not to fear. Anger.

Adam clamped a hand over her mouth before she said something she'd regret.

"I'll be at the circle in less than five," He cut the call without waiting for an answer.

When he let her loose, she launched ballistic, springing to her feet.

"No one? No one could have met his Challenge? What kind of protection is that?"

"We wouldn't have let him have you." He circled her cautiously as she paced. Damn, but even in a rage, she moved with lithe grace. And especially now, he saw a different kind of beauty in her, lethal. In combination with the potential he'd seen during mixed martial arts class, she could take a fight and truly make it into a killing dance.

"So what, just leave it at a stalemate? Or would we all sit in that freaking circle and play a game?"

Adam growled. Aggression strained past his control, rising in response to her anger and the underlying distress. In combination with his arousal, triggered by her heat and her temper, it mixed into a dangerous state. "We would have declared a champion for you."

"Didn't sound like it to me."

"Some prides wouldn't have, but River Gap pride stands for those it gives sanctuary to. We would have declared a champion. But, it doesn't matter."

"It does!" She whipped around, her dark eyes snapping with temper.

He met her face to face. "It doesn't. I claimed you. I will take on the Challenge. I will meet him in the Circle."

He saw it then, the worry in her eyes. The fear, not of him, but *for* him.

She opened her sweet mouth to speak, but he covered it with his own. Taking instead of waiting for her invitation, he sent them both drowning in arousal as his hard, demanding kisses claimed her.

"No buts, Kitten. No wavering." He finally let her up for air. "I told you when you chose me there would be no halfway. You chose. This is it."

She trembled, her hands clutching at his arms as they held her. She shook her head, and his heart stopped.

If she changed her mind it would tear him to pieces. Claim her? She already held the entirety of him in the palms of her hands.

“Do you want to take back you choice?” His voice broke.

Those big brown eyes snapped wide in panic. “No, no, no.”

His heart started to beat again.

“I just...” She released her grip on his arms and touched his bare skin below his sleeves with hesitant fingertips. Her feather-light touch drew at things deep inside him. She took a steadying breath. “I know what it feels like, those claws. I don't want those claws tearing into your skin. ”

When she hesitated, he didn't let her finish. Instead, he tightened his arms, pulling her against his chest. “Mine. You're mine. I won't let him do this to you anymore.”

She buried her face against him. There were no more words.

Minutes later, Adam strode through the forest. He'd left Mackenzie at his aerie with Mack and two Sentinels to guard her. Already, his cat clawed at him to get back to her, to protect her himself.

But, this protected her too.

The pride Circle rested away from town, close to the edge of its territory and on the outermost edge of Adam's personal territory. It wasn't coincidence. Several Sentinels held territory adjacent to the pride Circle. They provided another layer of protection between the outside and the pride.

He stepped out of the woods and into the Circle's clearing. The verdant carpet of grass and wildflowers covering other meadows nearby had been kept at bay in the Circle. Instead, it had been maintained as a perfect arena of deep sand, serving for formal, moderated fights. Blood spilled in the Circle, too many times to count, and as Adam stepped to the edge of the sand, energy pulsed against his skin. Places holding so much blood and death gathered a power of their own.

The stray stood at the other side of the Circle. He stood inches shorter than Adam, ripcord thin. Sharp intelligence and burning madness blazed in black eyes sunken deep into the stray's gaunt, almost starved face. Muscles stood in sharp relief around his neck and shoulders, cording across his forearms as he stood with his arms folded over his chest.

Fury burned through Adam slowly, turning his awareness colder and colder. Adam's field of view tightened until he didn't see the girl, Stephie, shifting from one foot to another behind Van. He didn't see his pride brothers on either side of the Circle. He had eyes only for the stray.

From the depths of cold rage, Adam gave him a grin, displaying his teeth.

"Challenge." Van's voice filled with triumph. "Challenge for the right to claim Mackenzie Sunton."

"Accepted." In contrast, Adam's voice sounded cold and neutral. "I'll be the one to meet your Challenge."

"You have a claim?" The arrogance in the other man's tone drew growls from the pride brothers all around the ring, but Adam simply smiled. He heard the frustrated undertone in the stalker's voice.

"I do."

The dark man sneered, his face contorting. "Brave cat to be willing to die for a claim on a girl who might not choose him."

"Mackenzie Sunton has accepted my claim." Adam widened his smile, allowing the whisper of warmth at the thought and pleased with the ugly hatred spreading across his opponent's countenance. It was one thing to fight a champion to first blood for the right to claim. Instead, the stalker would be facing Adam, and it would be until one of them surrendered or died.

"Sunset, tomorrow night," the stalker spat. Visibly agitated, he shifted his weight from foot to foot and clenched his fists.

Adam only nodded.

"Safe passage for myself and my own." Smart. Aaron didn't stand with the soldiers positioned around the perimeter and Stephie shadowed the stray, meaning the man

owed the pride Aaron's life. There could be no other explanation. Aaron wouldn't have left his post or allowed anyone outside the pride access to Stephe.

Adam paused, looking to Marcus. Marcus gave a slight nod. Adam would kill his opponent anyway. "Safe passage until the time of the Challenge is granted."

Formalities concluded, Van snarled. "I will kill you, jaguar, and take back what is mine."

Big words, filled with hot arrogance.

Cold, colder, Adam's rage deepened, his words steady and filled with real confidence. "She chose, stray. She chose me."

Adam waited until Van turned away. His opponent grabbed Stephe by the upper arm and led her away, stalking through the trees. Where they would stay the night, the pride didn't care, but the Sentinels would see they left pride territory.

"How do we track him?" Adam asked as Marcus fell in beside him.

"We won't lose him now we have eyes on him." His alpha assured him with grim determination. "We've increased patrols to watch for him, and we're doing a strategic analysis of the tactics he's used so far."

"Not enough." He strode through the woods, working off his temper. "He got past Enforcers and Sentinels, not just the regular soldiers. Analyzing what he did only teaches us what we did wrong. There's no logic to his actions because he's insane. Studying won't help us predict what he'll do next. And how he's gotten into and out of the territory over and over again, past our security, presents a real threat."

"He'll try to kill you," Marcus stated the obvious, as if it were matter-of-fact. "Easiest, most efficient way to get Mackenzie back is to go through you in the Circle. He'll play by the rules for her."

"His game ends there." Adam stopped then, clutching his fists and breathing deep as his cat raged to shred the stray right then and there. Instead, he focused on a future beyond the stray. "If he could get past us, so could others."

The alpha shrugged. "The stray was good, better than most. We'll have to step up training."



“We can't afford to let this happen again.”

All of the prides and packs held security at topmost priority. The strange hunters on the planet, stalking shapeshifters and humans alike, had to be stopped. The Conservation put out warnings and provided informational updates as data came in, but retaliation waited until they gathered enough information to strike back.

Thus far, the Enforcers and Sentinels of the pride proved too strong a shield for any of their own to be taken, but other shapeshifters in nearby territories had gone missing, as well as humans from the cities. The hunters took down other prey, easier to capture, non-predatory groups, and those with weaker defenses.

While all the prides and packs tightened defenses on their territories, they sought more and more information on the mysterious hunters with their advanced technology and unsettling combination of cybernetics and mutations.

The jetpack accident had been a part of such research.

“You girl's stalker has done us a favor.” Marcus latched onto the practical aspect. “He's shown us holes in our defenses, and we'll be able to adapt and be stronger for it.”

“Yeah, I'll remember to thank him after I extract payment for what he did to Mackenzie.”

“And Aaron.” Marcus confirmed Adam's earlier guess. The stray killed the young soldier.

“What do we do with the bitch?”

“She's following the stray's lead. She made her decision and stepped across the line.” No pity lingered in Marcus' voice. “She took the refuge we offered her and twisted it to get to someone under our protection. The pride will take its price once the outcome of the Challenge is settled.”

Adam nodded. There was nothing else to say.

Marcus reached out and clapped Adam on the back. “Get back to your girl before she takes out Mac and the other two. She's threatening to come looking for you.”

## Chapter 12

Mackenzie woke to early morning sun filtering through the canopy of leaves sheltering the aerie. Waking earlier in the morning seemed to be a trend but she could get used to the peaceful view. It was one of the changes in her life she didn't mind.

The rich aroma of coffee wafted into the room, a banquet for her sensitive nose. Her mouth watered.

"Morning, Sleepy," Adam murmured as he entered the room with a steaming mug in each hand.

"Mmm." She kept her eyes on the cup even though the pleasure of seeing him first thing in the morning spread an almost idiotically broad smile on her face.

His dark chuckle washed over her and ran shivers down her spine. Listening to it, so much richer than the light laugh he gave to others, made Mackenzie think of dark chocolate, melted smooth.

"No doubt about it, you definitely need coffee in the morning to get the conversation flowing." As he said it, she felt her heart flutter at the sight of the happy, molten amber of his eyes. "I decided to experiment this morning. We'll see if you like it."

Curiosity piqued, she took another experimental whiff of the aroma rising out of the mugs. It did smell different, engaging even the cat aspect of her and peaking her curiosity.

As Adam's smile widened into a grin, Mackenzie found herself distracted again. He had taken care of her the night before, providing her with a delicious dinner of fresh caught trout lightly floured and pan fried with thin slices of lemon, served with rosemary grilled potatoes and fresh greens lightly touched with butter. Then he'd given her a long massage, coaxing her to trust him enough to let him take off her clothes piece by piece so his clever hands could find every knot in every muscle the entire length of her back and legs. The touch had been infinitely personal and yet not quite crossing the line.

It fed her need and gave her relief from the intense sensitivity of her skin, but didn't raise the trauma hidden inside her following her attack. Every touch, every caress, had

been slow and clear in intent. Even lying on her belly, not able to see him, his hands had let her know where he was at all times. He'd even been very careful to cover the parts of her he wasn't working on with his bed sheets.

He'd lavished attention on her for hours, never demanding but always giving her the contact she craved. Even though she ached for a special touch deep inside, what he gave her banked it for the time being. Eventually, floating in a cloud of trust and relaxation, she'd fallen asleep for the night.

"Not wondering enough to give it a try?" He brought her back from her thoughts with a raised eyebrow and a mug waving slowly underneath her nose. His eyes were mildly questioning.

Well, it would do him good to be a bit curious himself. The way Adam knew to put her at ease, giving her just enough, unsettled her too. It'd be good to know he wasn't omniscient.

She took the proffered mug as she stuck out her tongue at him, feeling impish.

"Careful, it's hot," he admonished, but his eyes lingered on her mouth. She hid behind the rim under the pretense of smelling the steam again. The look in his eyes hungered, but he hadn't demanded anything from her. He could have taken advantage of her heat and fed the flames for both of them. No. Instead he'd given her enough touch to stay sane and not do anything she wasn't ready to come to all on her own.

"Thank you," she whispered to him, her heart thanking him for more than the morning drink.

"She speaks! And before the first sip, too!"

She wrinkled her nose and finally gave in to take a sip.

"Ooooh."

Adam grinned like a boy who'd given a wonderful new toy to a playmate. "You like it?"

"Mmm, mmm hmm."

"Back to no words again."

She ignored him and took another sip of heaven. He'd brought her the wonderful coffee, brewed strong and a bit spicy with the hint of the bitterness that made a good coffee so well-rounded. And it had a generous dose of real cream, adding an extra

velvety smoothness. But the real surprise ingredient, the one causing her eyes to roll back under fluttering lids, was the decadent ribbon of dark chocolate melted into the coffee.

Waking up in the morning had never been so wonderful.

Adam waited patiently, sipping from his own coffee as he sat on the edge of the bed. Carelessly perfect, as rugged as the wilderness surrounding his territory and all gorgeously polished musculature. With his jester's mask tossed aside, Mackenzie found him not just attractive, but absolutely magnetic.

Somehow, she really loved the morning when she could wake up and be near him. The coffee turned out to be a major bonus too.

“So, what's the plan for today?” She asked, partly because she wanted to hear him speak and partly because she'd nearly run out of coffee. “Are you going to tell me more about the Challenge? Do you have to prepare or train or something?”

“Nope.” He took her empty cup. “This morning we learn something new.”

“But the Challenge...”

“Will wait until sunset.” A firm dismissal. “I'm your instructor, and I'm going to take what time I've got to teach you the major things you need to know.”

Mackenzie shook her head in disbelief. “How can you think about lessons when something this important is looming over us?”

*What if the worst happens?* The unspoken question hung in the air between them.

Adam set his coffee on a night stand and reached out to cup her chin. “Because, Kitten, if you let Van stop life from moving forward, he wins. You showed me that yourself, leaving the city and coming out here. The way you came for lessons in mixed martial arts and the way you've been learning to be the shapeshifter you've become. So today, of all days, we're going to keep moving forward. What do you say?”

She studied the earnest look in his face. She looked into those gentle amber eyes and saw a fierceness lurking. He could control this, giving her what lessons he could. He wanted to go on teaching her while he knew he would be there. Neither of them could predict the outcome of the Challenge, or what would come after.

“You want me to *what?*”

Adam looked at her patiently from the safety of the forest floor. He had to be close to twenty feet below her.

“Jump.”

“I thought we were going to be going through lessons, not leaping out of trees.”

She heard Adam's chuckle, definitely sounding like he enjoyed every moment.

“This is part of the lesson, Kitten. You're a shapeshifter now. You can do a lot more than you used to be able to and you need to learn to gauge distances accordingly. Jump. This should be an easy drop for you to land on your feet.”

“Great.” She looked all the way down. It still looked too far to her, even if what he said made sense. After all, he'd managed the distance, against gravity, to carry her extra weight. “Okay, fine. Just...jump.”

When she hit the ground, her knees bent instinctively, her legs absorbing the impact as if she'd only jumped off a chair or a bench. Of course, her stomach seemed to have hung back up in the aerie, so it took a little longer to settle.

“See?” Cheerful Adam clapped her on the back. “Not a problem.”

“Uh huh. I'm down here, what are we doing down here.”

Adam took her hand and led her to a nearby log.

“You've been doing minor shifts since I met you.” He pulled her to sit on the log with him, straddling it so they faced each other with a few feet separating them. “But, you do it without control. You need to learn to shift at will and to control how much you shift.”

She leaned back a little. “Hey now, I thought the shifting to cat form was a bad idea because the heat would turn to blood lust.”

“True. But we aren't going to shift fully. You are. I'll be able to control you or run with you if you do need to hunt.”

“I like my steaks rare and all, but I'm not sure I'm ready to take my meat straight from the source.” In fact, her stomach turned at the thought.

“We're going to take it one step at a time, Kitten, have some faith.”

She studied him. The cheery Adam had returned, but not overbearing. Positive and taking an inordinate pleasure in the caution with which she approached the whole concept of learning from him. She decided Adam had a perverse way of getting entertainment out of life.

“So, what's the first step?” She couldn't help being suspicious.

“We work with what you've already been doing. We make your control over the claws a conscious act.”

She looked down at her fingertips. “How?”

“Spread your fingers out on the log.” He instructed, pressing her hands palm side down. His hands covered hers completely in a warm grip. She hadn't realized how much bigger his were.

“Okay.”

“Now think. How did you feel whenever they came out? Angry enough to clench your hands into fists, right?”

“Oh! Gotcha.” Mackenzie looked down at her hands, spread out on the log and pressed her fingertips into the bark as if clenching her hands. Nothing happened the first try, but the second try rewarded her with a slight prick as her claws pierced the skin of her fingertips.

“Good, try again.” He encouraged her, tugging a stray lock of hair.

By the end of an hour, she called her claws at will and retracted them as needed. The dead log had been deeply gouged, numerous times, as a result of their practice. Not only did Adam want her able to call her claws at will, he wanted her to feel what it was like to use them and get accustomed to the feel of resistance as they met with something solid.

The last bit unsettled her because sinking her claws into something solid gave her more gratification than she thought it would, like the satisfaction she got from landing a good hit on a heavy punching bag. Soon, Adam would be using his claws against Van. She knew what Van's felt like. It took effort not to cringe from the memory of rending pain as he'd gouged her muscles, a tightening ball of hate and fear centering in her chest.

Her worry must have shown in her face because Adam reached out to caress her cheek.

“You're doing great, stay centered on the lesson. Now, take off your shoes and we'll work on your feet.”

“My feet?”

Adam raised an eyebrow at her. "Cats use all four appendages. One of the best advantages you can have over your opponent is if you can get your feet between you, and claw them with the greater strength of your legs behind the claws. Besides, they come in handy for climbing too."

"Joy."

"It's fun. Once you get the knack of it, you can use the claws for traction too when there's unsure footing. It'll become habit."

She tried picturing it, but had trouble. "And all these little shifts are leading to one big shift later?"

"That's the plan."

She couldn't resist returning Adam's smile. His approach built her confidence, slowly desensitizing her to the weirdness of being able to shift into something other than human and giving her time to explore the new her in phases.

She almost forgot about the impending Challenge and the danger Adam would face. Almost.

But somehow, even being able to partially shift hands and feet, the ability to fully shift proved too elusive when Adam talked her through it late in the afternoon.

"Like I told you, Kitten." He encouraged her after several tries. "Relax and think of your inner cat. The cat isn't a separate entity. It's a different part of you. Most of the time you spend human, you spend exercising control over the cat so you conform to humanoid behaviors. Let yourself relax and let the part of your personality that is cat come to the forefront. You'll shift."

She frowned in concentration, breathing hard with the effort. Her inner cat hovered, a presence under her skin and in her mind. Her claws extended for both hands and feet. Her muscles in her back and calves strained with the beginnings of a shift, but her stomach knotted in cold fear. She needed to control herself, had to, or who knew what blood she would spill in cat form.

He'd reassured her he would be there to stop her, keep her under control. She had done some reading about her other form, the southern peninsula panther. Big cats and powerful predators, the subspecies of cougar could do massive damage. In terms of size,

Adam's jaguar form matched her potential but if he stayed in human form, she could inflict serious hurt.

As if he should risk harm from her, when he would be facing a Challenge in the very near future.

No matter how he encouraged her, try as she might, she couldn't shift. She tried again and again, pouring every drop of effort she had into commanding her muscles.

"It's okay," he stopped her. "Easy, there. You're tired. It's time to call it a day and get you back up for some rest."

Even as he spoke, sweat trickled into her eyes and stung. Her vision swam and suddenly his arms were locked around her. The day had been full of concentration and physical exertion with only a short break for lunch. What little mental capacity she had to spare had been tied up in worrying for him and the impending Challenge. She hadn't had time to think about her heat all day, only barely aware of it simmering below her skin.

The feel of his arms seared through her skin, and Mackenzie dropped her head into his shoulder, breathing deeply of the spicy musk of him after the long day. He smelled of wild things and forest and cinnamon.

Her hands clutched the fabric of his t-shirt, and she ached low in her belly.

He tucked her head under his chin and held her close, rubbing her lower back in slow, circular motions. "Ah, Kitten, it will only get easier from here. This is the worst of it." He cursed softly. "And, it is the absolute worst timing for it."

A laugh bubbled up, not an entirely sane one. "Yeah, timing. I'm not so good with it."

"Let's get you up to the aerie. You'll feel better after you take a shower."

His words remained clear but his tone turned husky. Tilting her eyes up, she watched Adam's eyes lighten from amber to jaguar gold, a sure sign he didn't have as much control as his voice indicated. She drew a breath to speak.

He put his thumb across her lips. "Don't say it. You don't want this yet, not with the heat. You want to come to this on your own. Remember?"

She swallowed and wondered if she really would regret jumping on him right then and there. And, if the worst happened in the Challenge, would she regret the lost chance?



"I'm right here, on my own."

He stilled, his face unreadable.

She dipped her head, letting her cheek fall into the cup of his hand. For a moment or two, she let the texture of his palm rub against her hot cheek. Then she made her case.

"Bad things happen, Adam." She looked back into his eyes, her face upturned so their lips were a whisper apart. "When there's a chance to enjoy good things, I'm not going to pass on them just because I have the excuse of something like the heat to cover my retreat. I'm right here, on my own, and the heat only makes it more interesting."

"You're sure about this."

"Unless you can give me a real reason this is a bad idea."

"Be sure, Kitten, because in about three seconds, it'll be too late to say no."

She narrowed her eyes as she considered Adam's words. He'd frightened a tiny part of her with the threat, before a quiet pool of calm spread deep inside her heart. He would never hurt her, never push her past what she willingly gave. She knew it with a surety, banishing the fear.

And in a different aspect, bluffing in another effort to protect her seriously tested her temper. For the moment, she and her inner cat shared a perfect accord.

Slowly, she lifted her lip from her teeth in a defiant snarl. "One."

He growled at her, and she took a perverse pleasure in tweaking his temper.

"Two."

Something blossomed deep in her chest, almost like laughter, exquisitely higher in temperature. Mackenzie nipped his lower lip.

"Thr..."

His hand flashed past her cheek to clasp her nape, strong enough to send little thrills through her entire body as he cut off the passing of the last second with a searing kiss.

She flattened her hands against the hard muscles of his chest and felt the strong beat of his heart as she matched his kiss in a tangle of tongue and teeth. His other arm pulled her tight against him, his hand spread across the curve of her lower back.

Fire lit between them, dancing on her skin so hot she could barely stand it. Only his touch gave her surcease, cooling and tingling as a sigh escaped from her lips when he let her up for air.

"We need to get up into the aerie." His voice, ragged with desire, sent chills down her spine.

"Why is that, again?" Mackenzie trailed soft kisses along his neck.

"I dunno about you, Kitten, but I'm a possessive kind of cat."

"And?" His hand in her hair excited her as his fingers rubbed ever so slightly into her scalp.

"And there's Mack and two other Sentinels out here. Minimum."

She tore herself from his arms, sucking air into her lungs as she fought for equilibrium.

He tensed as she glared out into the forest for a moment. She turned to him and let him catch a glimpse of temper. With a wild heart, she flashed her teeth in a feral smile and turned for the aerie.

"If I make it up there on my own," she tossed over her shoulder, "I have dibs on the shower."

She sensed more than heard him coming up behind her, jaguar fast, and let out an inadvertent squeal when his arm wrapped around her waist as she gathered herself to try the jump. The two of them jumped together, gaining the first level of the aerie easily. He tightened his grip and took them both up to the second level.

"We'll both use the shower," he murmured, scooping her up in his arms and striding inside to privacy.

A few voice commands set the walls of the bedroom to full opacity as he carried her through to the bathroom. Another command turned the shower heads on full. He set her on her feet and palmed the door of the bathroom closed so steam filled the room. He began to strip off his clothing, slowly, watching her as he did with a gaze so intense, her breath caught in her throat.

His eyes challenged her and the wildness in her heart rushed to meet him. Deliberately, she turned her back to him and bent over to remove her shorts in a long, smooth motion. Lifting her T-shirt, she gave him plenty of time to watch her reveal her behind and back as she gathered courage.

She'd been with guys before, but none of them ever elicited such an intense response from her. None of them had ever turned her on just by watching her.

She let her shirt fall to the floor and any vestiges of hesitation with it. Before she could turn to face him, he stepped behind her, intimately close. His hands barely brushed across her back as he undid her bra and then his fingertips slid against skin as he pushed the straps over her shoulders and free of her arms. Only her small, silken panties covered her.

He pressed himself against her back, his erection smooth and hard between them. She gasped and reached out to the stone tiles of the wall for balance as his hands ran gently over her shoulders and down her arms before sliding back up along the sensitive skin of her sides. His fingers followed the curve of her rib cage, teasing the undersides of her breasts, creating a sweet ache.

“Adam.” Her whisper part joy, part plea to her ears, almost lost under the sound of running water. The heat burned through her skin, made her throb between her legs.

He heard her, and kissed a burning trail along her shoulder and up the curve of her neck. He took the weight of her aching breasts in a firm but gentle grasp, such an act of ownership she moaned and let her head fall back against his shoulder.

The entire length of his muscular body pressed against her, making her feel more feminine than she ever had before. Caught between his hard body and the grip of his hands gently kneading her breasts, her own hands fell away from the wall as she leaned back against him, clutching the sides of his thighs.

“Easy, Kitten.”

She twisted her head to look up at him, whimpering with need.

His eyes reflected a purely male knowing, and he smiled down at her as his thumbs brushed across her tight, sensitive nipples. She cried out, and he caught her cries by covering her mouth with his own. His tongue darted between her lips and she returned his kiss hungrily, tasting deeply of his spicy wildness.

He continued to kiss her, as if wanting nothing else but that singular pleasure. She writhed under the firm kneading of his hands over her breasts and pressed back against the solid presence of his body. He groaned as her buttocks ground against his erection.

Sliding his hand down the front of her flat belly before gripping her hips, he hooked his fingers under her panties and slid them down her legs as his mouth licked and kissed its way down her spine.

“We need to get in the shower.”

She growled in protest and frustration, but his arms guided her in. Water danced across her sensitized skin from the shower heads above and to the sides, massaging and running along her limbs in a warm, silken slide.

“Let me take care of you, Kitten.” The deep need in Adam's voice touched her, above and beyond lust. She lost words.

He kissed her again, holding her in the shelter of his arms as water poured around them, rinsing away the sweat and heat of the day. His mouth released hers, sucking and licking the water from her skin, working its way down her neck and into the deep crease of her cleavage. Those wonderfully big hands covered her breasts, kneaded, and rubbed across her sensitive nipples.

She desperately held to the solid strength of his shoulders as he played, taking first one and then the other breast into the heat of his mouth, using his tongue to tease at her nipples. The water continued to rain down, and awash in so much pleasure, she could barely see.

She needed to do more than hold on, wanted to give as much as he did. Blindly, she reached between them and took the silken hardness of his erection into her hands. Wrapping her fingers around the solid length of him, she stroked once, twice. He growled against her breast and sucked hard, forcing her to cry out and grip him tighter.

Breathing heavily on little whimpers, she let out another soft noise of protest when he gently drew himself out of her hand and dropped lower. Frustrated, she looked down, barely understanding as he gazed up the length of her body for a long second. So much intimacy burned in the one look, and she gulped as her heart skipped a beat. Then, he lifted her knee and draped her leg over his shoulder, his hands sliding up the backs of her thighs to grip her backside firmly.

“Wha-”

He dipped his head, and his tongue darted between her legs. She jumped, but he had her in his grip, holding her steady. She leaned back against the stone tiles of the shower, cool in contrast to the heat of the water falling over her and the even hotter burn between her thighs as his breath blew across the sensitive skin of her most intimate place.

He wasn't going to...oh, but he was.

He dropped soft kisses all along the outer edge of her until she moaned again, aching for more of his silky touch. She'd never allowed previous lovers to touch her so intimately.

When his tongue slid into her, she bucked against him. Chuckling, he held her firmly and continued to explore her inner folds with firm strokes of his tongue and gentle kisses. He found the tiny, erect center of her pleasure, teased it with the tip of his tongue before he settled his mouth over it and sucked.

"Adam!" Wild with need, the heat singing through her blood and the cool contrast of the stone tiles her only anchor with reality. Her hands pressed flat into the tile for balance, afraid she might fly apart in his hands.

He switched back to long, hot strokes with his tongue. Before she could catch a ragged breath, he slid a single finger into her. And then he sucked on her clitoris again.

On a wordless cry, her inner muscles contracted around his finger. His mouth continued to kiss and suckle as he gently pumped in and out and teased around the clenching muscles of her opening. By the time he slid two fingers into her, she rode high on a wave of pleasure. The wave crested higher and higher with every stroke and every caress of his tongue. The water fell across her skin, and incredible sensations pooled deep inside her lower belly, tighter and tighter until she cried out again, flying apart.

Adam held her as the orgasm took her, stroking and nudging her clitoris, prolonging it. When Mackenzie finally came back to herself, he disengaged his hand and kissed his way back up her body. He paused to play with her generous breasts again, loving the weight of them in his hands and the deep rose of her nipples as they tightened under the attentions of his mouth.

He wanted to kiss and suck every inch of her, savor the taste of her skin and drink in the scent of her arousal in the steam of the shower. The water teased him too, keeping him primed for the time when she'd receive him.

And she was, the awareness returning to her eyes as she wordlessly watched him. He kissed those sweet lips again, loving her taste, all honey and fresh wild mint. His hands

couldn't stop roaming over her warm curves, memorizing the feel of her. She was his. If only for the one time, she was his.

"Mine." He whispered it against her lips.

"Yes." The soft, feminine agreement threw open the final lock on his control. Crouching just enough, he caught her behind in his hands and lifted her. She wrapped her legs around his waist in automatic response, her hands coming away from the shower walls to wrap around his neck.

He held her there, the tip of his erection nudging at her entrance, as he looked deep into her dark brown eyes and made sure no hint of fear hid in their depths.

"Mine," he said again, almost a growl. His inner cat wouldn't wait any longer, needed to claim her. He struggled for control, unwilling to hurt her.

"Adam." She pleaded with him. "Please. Please take me."

He couldn't hold back any longer. He entered her, slowly stretching her as he fit himself inside her moist, tight heat.

She cried out as he filled her, her head falling back so he could see the beautiful contours of her face traced by water. She felt so good in his arms, with him buried fully inside her.

He paused then, listening to their tattered breaths. As their breathing rose and fell, coming into synchronization, he gathered himself under her and began to move.

"Oh!" she cried out. "Adam!"

He murmured the only coherent thought he had left. "Mine."

He drew out and pressed back in, going crazy as her tiny inner muscles clenched all around him. He picked up tempo, driven wilder and wilder as her breasts bounced before him and her fingers dug into his shoulders. Her strong thighs locked around his back, helping him and urging him to give her everything she needed, everything he had to give.

She bucked against him, her inner muscles tightening around his cock as she came close to cresting again. He strained forward and set his teeth against the curve where her shoulder met her neck and cried out as he felt every muscle of her body convulse around him. One more desperate stroke deep inside her, and he came in a hot rush, buried to the hilt in her heat.

For the second time, Mackenzie slowly came back to herself, leaning her head forward until her forehead touched Adam's. They were both breathing heavily in time with an inner rhythm their hearts had found in the midst of their lovemaking.

After a moment he withdrew, and carefully set her back on her feet.

"Can you stand?" His voice sated and mellow, his arms still encircling her in gentle support.

"I think so." She gave a shaky laugh. "That was..."

A thread of anxiety ran through his eyes, tugging at her heart. "Did I hurt you?"

She couldn't tease him, not as he seemed strangely vulnerable, as if it would kill him to have hurt her. She laid a hand on the side of his cheek. "No, no. That was just ... incredible. Honestly."

The smile he gave her was slow, pleased, and unadulterated male.

She stood up on her toes and gave him a kiss. It was long and slow and ...wet. She glanced up at the shower heads, still going strong with hot water. "The hot water generators are pretty generous in this place."

He chuckled. "Good environmental engineering."

He reached over to a discreet alcove tucked in the corner of the shower and dispensed a small amount of shampoo into his hand. His other hand guided her to hold on to his waist. As they stood there, he gently dug both hands into her wet hair and began to lather it up.

"All of the houses in the territory access power from a centralized source. Most of the power is generated from windmills. Each individual home also has solar panels to run from in case they are cut off from the main power source. We've got very high efficiency water heaters that begin running when the house sensors indicate someone moving around inside the house. They heat water up quickly and the reserves last a good amount of time."

She closed her eyes, trusting herself to his ministrations as he gently massaged the shampoo into her scalp and then tilted her head back to rinse her hair clean. "The hot water in the city doesn't last nearly as long, especially at certain times of the day when everyone is getting ready for work."

He picked up a natural sponge and poured shower gel over it, working the gel into the sponge. He began to carefully but thoroughly cover her in lather.

“And, the water smells sort of metallic,” she added. A little beat of heat started to wake in her again as the texture of the sponge rubbed gently across her skin.

He looked at her with knowing eyes, but kept his ministrations ever so gentle. “In the cities, they treat their water with chemicals to dose the population with low levels of supplements. Acts as a preventative for a lot of the health issues and potential outbreaks that can happen in high population density centers. Shapeshifters have stronger immune systems so the water doesn't need to be treated to protect against what's in the water, and we don't introduce supplements to our population, so the water is going to be different.”

She thought on that for a bit as Adam helped her rinse thoroughly in the streams of water.

“My turn,” she said once he was done, holding her hand out for the sponge.

He seemed slightly surprised, but very pleased as he handed over the sponge with a fresh addition of gel. Working it into a lather, Mackenzie set to washing every inch of his body.

Some prompting within, perhaps her cat, maybe simply her, wanted to know every part of Adam. Built so beautifully, every part of him lean and muscular with the kind of definition she hadn't even known to dream of before she'd left the city. Human males were usually less defined in their physique, fit only to stay healthy and not shaped by the physical challenge of wild environment outside the cities. To her eyes, even his skeletal structure was more solid, more dense. By comparison, human males seemed easier to break.

She smiled a little wickedly as she paid particular attention to cleaning a certain part of his anatomy. As his penis stirred under her care, his eyebrow rose and his hands wandered over her body to give a little teasing back.

“Hungry for another round, Kitten?”

She gave him a rueful smile. “Maybe. I'm a little sore, but kind of thinking it'd be worth it.”



Adam dropped a kiss on the bridge of her nose. "We'll wait a little so we won't have to debate whether it's worth it."

And his consideration made a big difference from her past as well. In fact, whether in training or lovemaking, he made sure every experience came out as positive as possible. Fine-tuned to her moods, he left no room to himself for selfishness, matching every nuance of her needs over the last couple of days, sensitive in a way no man had ever taken the time or effort to be. It was as intrinsic a part of him to care for her as it was to protect and defend.

"We're clean," she pouted. "Maybe we need to go play in the dirt so we have an excuse to take another shower."

He chuckled as he turned off the water.

Adam's mood became significantly more serious by the time they reached the bedroom. He finished dressing before she did, and stood in the doorway.

"And we've run out of time." He broke it to her as gently as possible. "I need to get to the Circle."

"I'm coming with you."

"No," he snapped. His eyes flashed, and a rumble built in his chest.

"This," she indicated the whole of her body, "is all because of him and me. I have the right to face him."

"You aren't going to fight him."

She studied him, her eyes taking in the strength of his jawline and every curve of cheekbone and brow ridge, memorizing the topography of his handsome face.

"No," She agreed slowly as something primal spoke to her deep inside. "You are. I need to see it."

His jaw clenched, the muscles visibly jerking under the skin of his cheek. "This fight is serious. I'm not holding back. It's not just might—you *will* see the worst side of me."

"I've already seen evil." She let the memory of it creep into her eyes. "I'll stand witness while evil is turned away, whatever it takes."

"This isn't some fairy tale in a storybook, Kitten. I'm not a knight in shining armor about to vanquish an evil monster."

She didn't flinch. "And I thought we'd made the point that I'm not a child. Dramatic as it sounds, it is what it is. You said if I chose you, there are no other choices. It goes both ways, Adam."

He watched her stalk towards him, his brows drawn together in a scowl, but his eyes smoldered as they tracked her.

"You're not going to tuck me away for safe keeping," she insisted.

Silence stretched taut as he evaluated her resolve. One heartbeat, two, and then he gripped her upper arms and gave her a firm shake. "If you're going, you do what the Sentinels tell you, hear me? You're not a kid, but you are still new. You need to follow our lead."

She gave him a quiet snarl. "I hear you."

He let out his breath in a gust. "Even if I tried to make you stay here, you'd find a way to follow me."

"Basically." She wasn't going to make any pretenses about it either.

"Let's get going."

As they headed out of the aerie, he grumbled.

She batted at his shoulder with a loose fist. "Let's get this done, Adam, and go on living."

## Chapter 13

Mack slipped out of the surrounding forest to walk beside them as they neared the Circle. Adam appeared to sense his approach since the two of them only exchanged nods. Mackenzie heard something before Mack appeared, but still couldn't recognize the hints her shapeshifter senses gave her.

Besides, she'd been distracted. Soon after they left the aerie, she'd experienced a subtle tug, a mild anxiety driving her to get to the Circle quickly. Something new, outside of herself, clawed at her, telling her she needed to be there even though she'd already decided she would be.

It irritated her, made her want to shake her head and rub her eyes to clear them. Her inner cat batted at the imperative, growling inside her mind. And yet it continued, persistent, and strengthening as she drew closer and closer to the Circle.

Suddenly, the obvious hit her in the back of the head. She stopped in her tracks.

Always aware of her emotions, Adam turned to her immediately. "What's the matter, Kitten?"

"You said Van might have made a partial bond with me." She said the words slowly, testing the notion and finding it more and more plausible.

Adam and Mack both looked at her sharply. Adam reached out to caress her cheek. "Do you feel something?"

She scowled. "The most annoying, irritating urge to be at the Circle, which is stupid because I'm already heading there."

Adam eyes scanning her face in careful scrutiny. "Did you insist to come because of it?"

"No!" She shook her head, decisively slicing the air with one hand. "This started after I hashed it out with you."

Mack reached out and touched her shoulder. Meant to be a fleeting, comforting touch, Adam's lip still lifted at the sight of even the minor contact. Mack grinned at Adam but directed his question to Mackenzie. "The stray had a taste of your blood or flesh, huh?"

Adam growled. "Blood only, no scars, so he didn't take flesh."

"That's a relief." Mac maintained a matter-of-fact tone about it, his eye on Adam's increasing temper. "Could have been worse."

"He's calling her." Adam worked himself up to a fairly impressive rage, his lips drawn tight and his eyes going jaguar. The promise of violence gathered around him.

"Hey." She tapped his shoulder with a light punch. "I know it for what it is, and I can ignore it. What if he's only screwing around with me, or you? What if he's trying to get you all worked up and hotheaded before the Challenge? He's insane, Adam, but he always knows exactly what he's doing and plans something like ten moves in advance. Get your head straight and don't give him an opening. I'll keep myself in line."

They must have been close to the Circle, because Adam glanced through the trees and then gave a single, sharp nod in acknowledgement.

She still observed him with caution. "So, I'll stick with Mack, and you keep your head in the fight."

"You got it, Kitten," Adam said, his smile sudden, and unexpected.

She slipped her hand in his, as much for comfort as affection, and they began walking again. In minutes, they left the trees behind for the clearing containing the Circle.

Despite her brave words, Adam monitored her body language as they entered the clearing. Her heart rate increased and her breath quickened before she managed to force a steady, conscious rate. He could hear it, then smelled her fear as it rose up from her in a barely perceptible whiff of metallic tang. Her hand tightened in his, but she made no move to answer her maker's call. She fought the blood bond, and, he thought proudly, her will overcame the blood bond she'd unwillingly taken.

The Sentinels of the pride were all present, their posts and patrols covered by Enforcers and soldiers during the Challenge. A representative from the Conservation stood in the center of the Circle, aloof and absolutely objective.

A huge man, his arms clearly scarred by the claws of many opponents, the representative watched the gathering of the pride impassively. No one knew for sure

what other form he took, he always oversaw Challenges in human form, but even then, the man was formidable. His scent spoke of an uncommon species of large feline. Called Orson, he had to be the oldest shapeshifter Adam knew.

The Conservation provided oversight for formal Challenges. Such a third party observer held a special place outside pride or pack structure, standing equal to the alpha in status with the right to preside over the proceedings. Adam welcomed the representative's presence. It meant the outcome of the Challenge would be final, with no later questions.

A minute behind their entry into the clearing, Van arrived across the Circle.

Adam paused a few steps from the edge of the Circle. Lifting the small hand holding his, he dropped a soft, lingering kiss on the inside of her wrist where the pulse beat strong under the silken, delicate skin.

"For your freedom to choose, Kitten, no matter who it is," he whispered.

The flash of temper he loved so much sparked her eyes. "I already chose. Come back to me in one piece."

They'd spoken quietly, yet the clearing had been absolutely silent, and their voices caught the ear of every shapeshifter more effective than if they'd shouted.

A high pitched growl came from the other side of the Circle.

She fixed her gaze deliberately across the Circle, looking Van full in the eye, challenge and dominance in every line of her body. She'd made her choice clear, and in the eyes of the pride, Van had already been defeated.

Marcus stepped to her and guided her away to stand by him. Mack took up a solid position on her other side. Several of the Sentinels moved in behind her, surrounding her in the strength of the pride, making a statement of their own.

Assured she would be protected, Adam turned to focus on his fight.

He looked over his opponent as they faced each other. The southern peninsula panther didn't have the same appearance as the panthers found in the jaguar prides, panthers like Adam. It had been known in the days prior to the Cataclysmic Wars as a Florida panther or cougar, close to extinction, surviving only in reserves and zoos prior to the wars. The population remained small, but the Conservation had brought the species, and the shapeshifters, back from the brink. Adam knew Van wouldn't yield, and

it would be a shame to kill one of a species struggling to gain a new foothold in the world.

It would be a blow to the species, but it would be a favor to mankind.

Orson gave Adam a nod, then turned to Van. He waited until Van quit growling, and nodded as well. No more ceremony, Orson stepped out of the Circle. The Challenge had begun.

“Mackenzie is mine, jaguar,” Van shouted across the Circle.

Adam shrugged, baring his teeth in a wide grin. “She chose different.”

Van let out a scream of rage. That was all it took. The dark man charged straight across the Circle, and Adam surged forward to meet him.

They clashed close to the center in a flurry of movement. Van had partially shifted, wielding fur covered claws for the first strike. Adam had anticipated it, remembering Mackenzie's description of her Change. He avoided the first swipe, ducking under the other man's shorter reach and landing a few rib-cracking blows as they passed each other.

His opponent only smiled, blood thirst shining in his eyes.

They circled for a few moments, assessing each other anew and looking for openings. Stephie, standing on the very edge of the Circle, gave Adam the next clue for his opponent.

Panting hard, she stared at Van, her eyes still glazed over with the heat. “Yes, oh yes.”

When Adam landed another blow, a slanted kick to the upper thigh, Stephie hissed in pain and pleasure and laughed maniacally.

In the grip of a strong bond with Van, Stephie projected for the both of them. Adam's opponent savored the pain, redirecting it as pleasure. He, and Stephie by extension, literally fed off the pain of the fight. There would be no yield from an opponent who loved the pain inflicted.

Adam changed his tactics. He didn't hit to inflict pain anymore, he hit to disable. His hands shifted to claws, matching his opponent's, and he aimed at tendons and joints.

Van seemed to sense the change in the rhythm of the fight. He changed defensively but not offensively. He must've assumed pain would still be a deterrent for Adam.

The fight moved around the Circle, a succession of lightning fast moves and then snarling pacing as they looked for their next openings. Adam had to admit, as his breathing came hard and blood trickled from various tears in his hide, Van matched him in human form.

Van must have decided the same. He backed up until he stood at the far edge of the Circle, and then screamed as he ran full speed for Adam, leaping into the air. In mid-air, he completely.

It caught Adam by surprise. The complete shift left a shapeshifter vulnerable, and most adult shapeshifters couldn't shift quickly in mid-air. They had to be stationary and hold the same position from beginning to end.

Adam grappled with the huge cougar, a raging scream of ashen tan cat. Claws gouged into his arms as he held the bone-crushing jaws away from his neck. Bringing his knees up to protect his soft belly from the raking claws of Van's hind legs, he gave ground and used the cougar's momentum to send him flying across the Circle. In a flash, Adam rolled to his feet and Shifted.

The stray wasn't the only one able to Shift in a heartbeat.

Even in big cat form, they matched each other closely. Adam's jaguar form was large, but so was the cougar. The cougar had a longer reach, but Adam's cat had more powerful forelegs and shoulders.

Ducking under Van's guard, Adam landed several crushing blows to Van's shoulders and side, not only breaking bone but rending flesh with razor sharp claws. He didn't get away unscathed. Van shredded his shoulder.

They met in a clash of teeth and claws, twisting and turning. Two big cats could do a lot of damage. Blood flowed freely.

Mackenzie watched with her heart in her throat. From a distance, she could feel the pleasure Van derived from the pain, and it made her stomach churn. Watching Stephe on the edge of the Circle, Mackenzie couldn't recognize even the hint of her old friend. A part of the reason Mackenzie had come had been to see if there could be some way to help her friend break free. But there could be no rescuing the willing.

So she focused on the battle. When Adam and Van shifted, the two fighters became more clearly discernable. Adam's pelt stood out strikingly beautiful, the classic black panther she'd always pictured in stories. In contrast, Van possessed ashen tan, almost gray fur, paling to white at his belly. The cougar, the southern peninsula panther featured in her nightmares, seemed washed out next to the reality of Adam.

The fight continued, and blow for blow, the two big cats matched too well, neither would ever yield. But in a strange twist, Adam gained the advantage, holding Van by the back of the neck, at the base of the skull. If Adam's jaws closed, he would crush Van's skull.

Van's claws dug into the sand, but he only yowled.

"Damn, the stray isn't yielding," Mack said in a low voice. He spit to one side.

Marcus nodded on her other side. "He's going to make us kill him."

*Us.* Because pride was one. Adam wasn't alone, even in the Circle. The pride would stand behind his actions and take responsibility.

As she watched, Adam's jaguar eyes fixed on her. Van struggled in the hold, but Adam had him. It would be the end. Everything Van had done to her would be finished in the next moment. Relief washed through her, through every muscle and every fiber of her being, no horror, only peace. There would be no more nightmare. Slowly, Mackenzie nodded.

It was over.

Adam stood, shifting as he did, so he faced Mackenzie as a man. He knew when the rush of the fight ebbed, he would feel every injury. But for the moment, relief filled him as he saw her brown eyes held no more fear, even though she had been watching when he'd made the kill. Dizzy, blood rushing in his ears, he struggled to catch his breath.

With Van dead, she could finish healing. But when she had time to absorb all the events as they had happened, she would remember what Adam had done. She might change her choice, once she thought about it.

Because he had only been watching her, he saw the fear, and the anger, change her face. Her eyes dilated, melting from deep chocolate to burnished gold.



In less than a heartbeat she moved, towards him it seemed, and his heart died. She'd finally seen the monster he could be. He stood ready, not willing to fight her, because his life was hers.

Mackenzie shot past him and he panicked. Where?

He turned, suddenly hearing the roars of anger and the shouts of warning from the pride. Mackenzie slammed into Stephie head on.

Both females had claws out, but Stephie had progressed further through her Shift, had the longer reach and greater height. But Mackenzie had used her lower center of gravity and stronger frame to her advantage, dropping her shoulder into Stephie's midriff as they collided. Thwarted, Stephie changed her target from Adam's unprotected back, setting herself to ripping Mackenzie to shreds.

"Me!" she screamed. "He loved me! You killed him!"

"No, Stephie!" Mackenzie shouted back. "Van wouldn't yield. He wouldn't yield."

"Bitch!" Stephie grappled, turning her claws to tear at any part of Mackenzie she could reach. Pushing Mackenzie back, Stephie made her give ground. She swung at Mackenzie with a blood thirsty ferocity born of rage and insanity.

Adam started in, but Orson grabbed him by the arm.

"This isn't a Challenge!" Adam shouted at the arbitrator.

Orson remained unmoved, his grip on Adam unbreakable. "It is between the two females."

Adam cursed and spun around in desperation. Mackenzie didn't have enough experience.

But Mackenzie learned fast, and she'd absorbed everything he taught her. As the two females fought, it became clear Mackenzie brawled like she'd been born to it, a natural fighter. But Stephie acted on pure rage, driven mad by the broken bond with Van. The pride could do nothing but watch.

Stephie swung blow after blow, but Mackenzie caught the rhythm of the attacks. Fewer blows connected as Mackenzie ducked and slipped in a shot of her own, a swipe to the shoulder, a gouge to the ribs. As Stephie bled, the warmth drained from Mackenzie's eyes, only violence remaining in her frozen expression.

Screaming, Stephie renewed her attacks, striking wildly. She drew blood across Mackenzie's shoulder, her thigh.

Mackenzie stumbled backwards, losing a shoe. Stephie snarled, pressing her advantage, struggling to claw at Mackenzie despite the desperate grip Mackenzie had on each wrist. Another stumble back, another shoe lost, and Stephie's eyes gleamed with triumph.

Then Mackenzie fell backward, holding onto Stephie's wrists. Stephie pounced on top of her.

But she got her feet in between them, catching Stephie in the stomach with a full set of claws. She shoved hard, let go of Stephie's wrists, and the power of her push sent Stephie flying.

The other woman landed yards away, disbelief in her eyes as she struggled to stand. Her insides spilled out of her torn belly, and after long, gasping moments, the light faded from her eyes.

Orson released Adam and he ran for Mackenzie, gathering her into his arms.

“Kitten? Kitten!”

Pale and rigid in his arms, Mackenzie stared at Stephie's corpse. Fine tremors began to run through her entire body. Adam's cat snarled as the scent of her blood told him she'd been hurt. Adam checked her over quickly, trying to assess the damage done.

Pride members approached but kept a careful distance. Somewhere in a corner of his mind, Adam recognized the caution around him. Males could be extremely volatile when a female was injured and even more so if the male had staked a claim.

The desire to protect warred with the need to get her help. Precious moments went by as Mackenzie showed the signs of falling deeper into shock. Adam growled urgently. “Where is Chryssa?”

“Here, Adam, let me see her.” The petite healer appeared out of the trees, rushing to Adam's side. She hadn't been present earlier, too precious to the pride to risk as its only healer. But she had been close by, called back from her trip because of the Challenge.

Immediately, a cooling calm smoothed the jagged edges of Adam's temper. Mackenzie's tremors began to subside.

Chryssa's gifts as a healer made her unique. No shapeshifter or animal would ever attack the healer, short of madness. She brought peace and surcease from the pain, helping a person step back from the instinctive fight or flight reaction to injury. It gave her the chance to get past the shapeshifter's defenses and heal them without injury and without risking additional damage to the patient.

Chryssa assessed the situation efficiently, her knowing eyes skimming over both Mackenzie and Adam. Adam watched her, unable to keep a low warning growl from issuing despite the healer's calming effect. She shushed him absently and focused on his girl.

"Mackenzie," Chryssa said gently. "Mackenzie, look at me."

She put a subtle emphasis on the command. Adam watched Mackenzie tear her eyes from Stephanie's body in response. Once Chryssa had her gaze locked, he felt the difference in Mackenzie's body. Some of the rigidity loosened and she sagged slightly in his arms.

"I...I..." Mackenzie, struggled to speak.

Chryssa hushed her kindly. "It's all right, Big Mac. Is it all right if I call you that? I love the nickname."

Mackenzie nodded, her throat still working, color beginning to come back to her face. The petite healer continued to do what she did best, keeping up a light banter, progressively putting Mackenzie at ease and winning enough trust to examine her more closely.

"All right, Adam, you're going to have to loosen up on Big Mac here so I can take a look at her injuries. Let me take a look at your hands first, looks like there's some cuts to your wrists and forearms."

Chryssa turned Mackenzie's hands over gently to examine the damage. "It looks pretty superficial. Nothing needs stitches, and we'll give it all a good cleaning to help with the healing. You'll heal faster than you're used to, which is why we want to be sure it's all clean."

Satisfied Mackenzie had no serious injuries; Chryssa opened up a small medical kit by her side and took out a few solutions. She cleaned Mackenzie's wounds carefully and quickly even though Mackenzie started to fuss.

"Adam's hurt worse," Mackenzie fretted.

"Now let's get you cleaned up so Adam will let me see to his injuries." Chryssa reasoned, allowing no argument, keeping a firm grip on Mackenzie's arm. "The longer it takes for me to finish up with you, the longer he'll hold out and not let me see to him. Best way to deal with a stubborn male is to work with his need to take care of you. He'll submit to care once he's reassured you are safe."

Mackenzie finally broke Chryssa's hold on her gaze to look at Adam. He bled from countless gouges. Her brows drew together in such a worried expression, Adam dropped his head to rub his cheek against her in a brief cuddle, before tucking her head under his chin.

Chryssa wrapped up her ministrations and pounced on Adam.

"Done for Mackenzie, Adam, now you show her you can be every bit as well-behaved."

She spoke to him like a stubborn cub. He narrowed his eyes at her but stood so she could give him a good once over.

"A couple of stitches and a wrap for the broken rib." Chryssa concluded. "Everything else should heal with a good cleaning. We'll need to irrigate some of those puncture wounds from the bites."

Mackenzie hovered, which Chryssa took in stride. She even had her assist, calmly talking through each step so as not to touch off the protective instinct in Mackenzie.

The entire time, he felt the healing balm Chryssa laid down with her touch, soothing away the throbbing pain from every wound. Bleeding slowed and fever cooled to normal temperatures as a result of the work the healer did that couldn't be explained by science. The healing simply came to her, and the shapeshifters accepted it as a part of what allowed them to change form.

"The two of you need to get rest," Chryssa continued in a firm tone, brooking no argument. "No duty for Adam for at least a week. The healing will take more out of you than you realize, and we can't afford to have either of you vulnerable." Over Mackenzie's shoulder, Chryssa gave Adam a pointed look. To Mackenzie, she added, "You need to be more thoroughly briefed on the hunter threat. Forewarned is forearmed and I'm told

you already saw the jetpack the teams are examining so you at least heard about the hunters.”

Mackenzie nodded.

“Truth is, we don’t understand enough about them to know who could be at highest risk but someone as unique as you, a human Changed to shapeshifter, might draw attention.” Chryssa’s brows drew together in a worried expression, her eyes warm and compassionate as she spoke.

Adam hurried to add reassurance for Mackenzie, “Some hunters have been turned away from their targets in other territories. I’ll protect you, Kitten.”

But she remembered previous conversations. “No one, pride or pack or human, has taken a hunter down, not completely.”

Chryssa laid a hand on Mackenzie’s shoulder, soothing. “Until we all have more information, the dominant prides and packs in every territory stand on alert. We’re prepared if things escalate beyond isolated scuffles and we’ll keep you safe.”

Adam ran his hand over Mackenzie’s silken hair and then pulled her to him, tucking her head under his chin. After a moment, her trembling calmed and her words came out muffled against his neck. “I guess it’s better to know.”

“It is, Kitten.” He murmured against her hair.

“But we’ll stand together.”

Hugging her closer, he nodded. “Us, together.”

Marcus spoke directly to Adam. “No duties for at least a week. We’ll have supplemental patrol on your territory in the meantime.”

As Mackenzie raised her head at his words, the alpha knelt to touch her cheek, a touch of affection and of promise. Bristling, Adam controlled his instinctive territorial response, glad of his alpha’s gesture and her courage. She’d taken down a threat to the pride, an attacker who had gone after one of his Sentinels in a moment of vulnerability. She had such a young face, with so much in those eyes, and a proven heart. She had shown every Sentinel in the pride she was a fighter who could be trusted to watch their backs.

“You have choices, Mackenzie,” Marcus told her. “We offer you membership within the pride, more than protection. If you’ll have us, you’ll be family. And you can stay with

Adam, or we can find you a temporary place until you pick out your own territory within pride lands.”

Adam growled, but Marcus held up his hand.

“She has choices.” And as alpha, Marcus would enforce them, even against Adam.

Adam ceased growling, but he crouched down behind her and rubbed his cheek against her hair.

Marcus continued as if Adam's temper hadn't interrupted. “If you choose to leave, we'll sponsor you to any other pride until you find one you want.”

Mackenzie blinked slowly, those long lashes brushing against bruised skin beneath tired eyes. “So much, so fast,” she whispered.

Marcus chuckled. “You pack a sizable impact for such a small package, Big Mac.”

“Do I have to make all the choices now?”

Marcus shook his head. “Plenty of time and answer them in any order.”

“For now,” she said slowly, one small hand reaching up to lay flat against Adam's neck. “Can I go back with Adam for now and sleep on a few things?”

“You bet.” The alpha motioned to the big Enforcer hovering nearby. “Mac will help you two get back, and I'll check in with the two of you in the morning.”

“Bring coffee?” She asked in a tiny voice, but he heard a thread of mischief.

Marcus laughed louder. “With coffee.”

She gave him a sweet smile, touching the heart of every warrior standing in the clearing.

Once the couple had left the clearing, Marcus headed for Orson.

Orson watched the alpha's approach impassively. He held silent for a long pause under the alpha's gaze, but finally, he spoke. “No Challenge issued, but it was a clear fight between females. No other females present, so no one could interfere within the Circle.”

Marcus nodded, but his chest rumbled. “Mackenzie is new, you know it. She didn't make an informed decision to enter the Circle. She couldn't be held by the laws governing combat in the Circle.”

“Neither could the other female.” Orson countered. “They were made under the same circumstances.”

Marcus chewed on the point for a moment, then he moved on. “Mackenzie saved you the trouble of putting the mad female out of her misery. What is the judgment on Mackenzie?”

Humans Changed to shapeshifters were rare. When the circumstances arose, the sponsor pride or pack and an objective representative of the Conservation evaluated them and their progress adjusting to life as a shapeshifter. Not every Changed being could handle the transition. A rogue shapeshifter, unable to control the instincts and urges, would be a danger to anyone and anything in its path. If the Conservation deemed the subject unable to make the transition, the sponsor pride or pack had to destroy the rogue or defer to the Conservation representative to do so.

Marcus had submitted his thoughts on the way Mackenzie had handled the events of the days since she had come to the pride. The final decision would be up to Orson.

“The child needs to learn control.” Orson spoke after a moment of hesitation. “And she doesn't know what she doesn't know.” The big shapeshifter shook his head. “The potential mating should provide a stabilizing influence, but it could also hide developing madness.”

Marcus ground his teeth but held his peace. The Conservation representative hadn't given his judgment yet.

“We'll put the girl on probation,” Orson said finally. “Keep me updated on her progress and what choices she makes. If she can get past the trauma of the original attack and the last couple of days, maybe she'll stabilize. It's not only her mental and emotional stability in human form. She needs to prove she can shift and maintain control over her other form.”

Marcus nodded once. It was fair.

Orson reached out a hand; Marcus took it and shook it firmly.

They would give Mackenzie time and see if she could heal.

## Chapter 14

“Me! He loved me! You've killed us both!”

Mackenzie woke with agonizing slowness, clawing her way up through the heavy dark of a deep and restless sleep. Stephie's voice followed her out of unconsciousness, accusing her even in waking. As she looked up through the transparent ceiling, the leaves sheltering Adam's bedroom cast shadows. Only a gray overcast sky could be glimpsed beyond the leaves, and the air weighed heavy with humidity.

Tears came to her, unsummoned, at the thought of a gloomy day, her chest hollow, as if something had gone missing from her soul. Her heart beat in a hesitant, fragile rhythm in the empty space. Her mind reached, trying to find the missing pieces, and between one breath and the next, she remembered the Challenge and what had happened afterward.

“Adam,” she whispered, and fear caught at her heart.

The sheets rustled beside her. Adam slept next to her, his bed so big she hadn't realized they'd shared it. Relief swept through her in a tide of emotion, taking her breath away. Suddenly shy, she peeked at him under the covers.

To her relief, most of the nasty gouges had already visibly improved. Bandages still wrapped around his ribs, and he had some fantastic bruises coloring his tanned skin, but his color appeared good and he rested easily.

She slipped out of the bed and padded out into the main living area, rubbing her upper arms as she looked for something she couldn't find. Her heart ached with loss, torn in pieces. She couldn't understand why a part of her could be happy just from the scent of Adam's T-shirt covering her, while the enormity of the evil she had wrought threatened to choke her.

Numb, she sat at the edge of the living room on a few cushions, looking out and yet studying her reflection in the glass at the same time.

In too many ways, she didn't recognize the girl she saw in the reflection, any more than she recognized the trees making up the vast forest of her surroundings.

“Kitten?”



Adam walked out of the bedroom, but she didn't turn to look at him. Instead, she hugged her knees to her chest, still too fragile to speak.

"Hey." His voice soothed as he settled on the cushions behind her and wrapped his arms around her, immediately enveloping her in warmth.

"Why?" She had to swallow past the dry catch in her throat. "Why does everything seem to be okay when you're here?"

"Is that a bad thing?"

"I should feel worse." Then the cold returned, seeping through her heart. "I did something awful."

"Ah." Understanding filled his voice. He paused, possibly considering her crime, and then he gave her a question back, his voice strangled. "Do you feel anything about what I did to Van?"

Blood flashed across her sight, but relief swept through her. "He won't be coming after me anymore. He won't do what he did to any other girl again, what he did to me and to...Stephie."

He squeezed her close with a relieved sigh and gave her another question. "You're not afraid of me?"

"You did everything you could," she said slowly, remembering his cat eyes as he held Van in his jaws. "He didn't yield, didn't give you any other choice."

"Then why do you think what you did might be any different?"

Horror filled her. "She...she was my friend."

The look of disbelief on Stephie's face hung in her memory in sharp relief.

"Why did you do it, Mackenzie?" His voice not judging, but gently prompting, and Stephie's voice echoed the same question in harsh accusation.

"She attacked you from behind. You couldn't see her coming, and no one else moved." The fear she'd felt seeing danger come at his unprotected back had been a stab in the heart. "I had to move. But she went crazy, wild. She wouldn't listen."

She remembered the madness in Stephie's eyes, burning with hate. Mackenzie began to tremble uncontrollably. He held her, his steady strength keeping her from shaking herself to pieces.

"She'd have killed me, if she could. She meant to kill you." Her voice went flat. Stephe's intent had been clear, and Mackenzie had known it on a primal level. "I couldn't stop her until I kicked her away...but she... when she landed, she stayed down."

Her gorge rose as images of innards and blood flooded her memory again.

He tucked her head under his chin and held her firmly. "Defense. I know you've never killed, but it was in self-defense."

She whimpered. In her mind, the scene replayed over and over again, at the same time, tasting her own fear and panic. Stephe had fallen and died awfully because of injuries *she'd* inflicted. She felt monstrous, horrified by the memory of exactly what she done. She had taken a friend and disemboweled her, giving her an awful death.

"I should have found a way," She insisted. "But I couldn't think of anything. I couldn't think! I didn't want her to kill me, didn't want her to go after you. That's all, but I killed her and there wasn't anything clean or honorable about it. I spilled her guts all over the ground."

He rocked her slowly, back and forth. "It isn't easy, Kitten, but you have to forgive yourself."

"I don't know what I am anymore." she stared past the glass, out into the wild forest. "I can't get my bearings, and I don't know who the girl is staring at me from the reflection in the glass."

Her insides twisted. "I killed myself, in a way. Stephe could have been me. I killed her, and you know what? I felt good when my claws sunk into her belly. I knew to go for the soft area, a weak spot, and I was glad I found it. I was glad I got her off me. It gave me a rush."

"Kitten..."

"No, Adam." She tried to pull away. "Van turned insane. He made Stephe, and she went insane. I'm right behind them, and you're going to have to put me down before I hurt somebody else."

"No!" Adam yanked Mackenzie back into his arms and almost crushed her to his chest. Ignoring the pain from his still knitting ribs, he held her to him with everything

he had. "Kitten, you're different from them. What happened in Circle wasn't rational. You can't expect yourself to react rationally. No one could."

"Rationally? I'm a murderer!" Her eyes had lightened from dark brown to golden, her cat too close to the surface.

"You need to forgive yourself, Kitten." He put every ounce of conviction he had into his words. "Violence is a part of what we are. Accept it."

"Look at what I did." Her voice dropped away from panic to a sudden desperate whisper.

"And I would do it for your sake again and again." He gave her the promise. "Does that make me a monster?"

She pulled away enough to look up at him, eyes wide.

He knew he risked what he'd built with her already. He put his heart into his eyes, his voice and his touch. "I would do it over and over again for your sake, Mackenzie Sunton. And I don't care if I sound obsessive, because there is a world of difference between me and Van."

"A difference," she echoed as if his words were a lifeline.

"Why does anyone do what they do?" he asked, reaching for the words she needed, the lesson all cubs learned as they grew up within the pride. She had to hear it and know for truth, learning it faster as an adult than any cub took in their more flexible years. "We use teeth and claws and strength only when needed. Hunt only to feed. Fight only to protect. Violence is a part of who we are because the world we live in is a violent place, but we are more than violence because we have an honor code to live by."

She listened, he could see it in her face and in the slow change from gold back to deep brown in her eyes.

"Predators are an important part of this world," he continued, watching her closely. "We're needed to cull out the sick and the weak. You did what you were meant to do. You didn't go beyond to ravage the healthy."

She dropped her eyes, long lashes brushing her cheeks as her lids closed, but she gave him the barest of nods.

“Try.” He released her enough to hold her face in the palm of his hands. “Give yourself time to forgive yourself. You deserve another chance. Anything you did, you did living by those things and the pride will stand behind you. I'll be right here.”

She swallowed hard. Her cat remained prominent in her eyes, but her mouth pressed in a firm line as she struggled for control. In a way, he almost hoped her cat would take over enough to let her accept the necessity of her actions in a way a city bred human probably couldn't.

“I need to think about it more,” she finally answered him.

It wasn't self-destructive. He would take that and work with her on the rest. Hell, it had taken her to make him forgive himself. He only needed her to accept the person she had become at first. Forgiveness could come later.

“Okay.” He stood without wincing too much and pulled her up to stand with him. “Let's get some food into you and then go do something...restful.”

She paled again. “I'm not sure I can eat.”

“Just a little,” he coaxed. “Even toast. You have to have something in your stomach. You can't let yourself get too hungry or the beast in you will push you to hunt.”

He bit the inside of his cheek, realizing he'd chosen the wrong thing to say as she paled even further.

“Really not liking the idea of food right now,” she gasped.

“How about a little soup.” He changed tactics. “Soup might calm your nerves, and you like comfort food.”

She hesitated. “I'm sorry to be so much trouble. Maybe a little vegetable soup would be a good idea.”

Her scent held the faint tang of shame, and guilt for making him press her. His cat shifted restlessly inside his skin as he kissed her forehead. Her heart stretched too big for her own good.

“I think I have some of the canned stuff,” he said lightly, “It won't be more than a couple of minutes to warm up.”

He led her to the kitchen, worrying even more when she slid onto the stool by the counter instead of coming with him into the actual kitchen area to help him cook. He

kept her in his peripheral vision as he retrieved a can, opened it and dumped it into a pot to heat on the stove. She still stared into space.

He groped for something to say, but the security panel chimed. Mackenzie almost shot straight out of her chair.

He turned and slapped the acknowledgment code into the panel before it chimed again.

"Yeah." He engaged video and audio at the same time. While he would have preferred to ignore the call, the pride would have been swarming all over his aerie if he or Mackenzie hadn't answered. With both wounded, and her unstable, they'd be watching over them.

Marcus' face filled the vid-screen. "How goes the two convalescents?"

"Healing." He glanced back at her over his shoulder.

"I'm coming up with Chryssa for your check-up." Not a request. The pride alpha had taken the Challenge and the altercation between Mackenzie and Stephe very seriously.

Adam simply nodded acknowledgment. Marcus cut the call from the ground level and in minutes, Adam heard him and Chryssa landing on the platform of the first level. Adam went down to the entry way, careful of his wounds, and let them in at the main entrance.

"How is she?" Marcus got to the point, keeping his voice low as he and Chryssa entered.

Adam gave a sound of frustration in response. "She's not herself. The heat's passed, and she doesn't even seem to notice. She's been hard on herself for the death of her friend and she sounded...self-destructive."

Chryssa listened as she bustled around Adam, checking his wrapped rib cage and the progress of several of the wounds. Finished, she spoke to both Adam and Marcus. "A couple of the stitches can come out today. Healing is going fine. We're lucky your hide is so thick, Adam, you're a tough one." And then Chryssa turned her attention wholly to Adam. "Is her color off? Is she eating?"

"No, she's paler than normal and she doesn't want to eat." Adam shook his head. It had been easier to hold his sense of humor up as a front. Giving in to the shadows of

worry tore at him, but he couldn't seem to step into his old detachment. "I got her to agree to some vegetable soup, but anything with meat has her nauseous."

He watched the little healer's face as she considered. Her presence had a calming effect on the anxiety building up as he had watched the drastically altered Mackenzie. After a moment, Chryssa nodded. "We'll know more once we get a look at her, but there's a couple of things I can think of contributing to the problem."

"I need an honest assessment of how the girl is adjusting." Marcus became all alpha and completely serious as he directed his statement to both Adam and Chryssa. "We've got a few days of time to give her, but we need a real idea of how she's going to move forward."

"You're not thinking of..." Adam dropped words for a threatening growl.

Marcus growled back at the challenge but added his own words. "We'll give her a chance, but we need to know if she's going to make the transition, for her sake and for everyone around her. You know it, Adam."

"She adjusted fine," Adam insisted, his growl gone, but he didn't stand down.

"And now she's not," Marcus said in a flat tone, uncompromising alpha at the moment, and Adam knew once Marcus made a decision it would be final.

"You'll have to take me down with her." Adam desperately added. He couldn't lose her, not when she had become so precious to him, not when she had driven herself to the edge of insanity to protect his back.

"We'll give her the chance and then decide." Marcus didn't belittle Adam's commitment. He simply held the statement for when it would matter, if it would. Things might not come to it, and they both knew, hoped.

"Let's go see her." Chryssa had been watching the exchange from one side, and her voice filled with compassion. She brushed a hand up Adam's upper arm in encouragement, a touch of comfort from pride member to pride member. Shapeshifters needed the simple gestures of affection every bit as much as they needed the more overt, sensual, contacts. In some ways, shapeshifters needed those little touches more.

Mackenzie hadn't moved from the stool where Adam had left her. He noted she hadn't touched the soup or turn to watch their approach. Her hair appeared dull and uncombed, still in disarray from earlier in the morning.

Chryssa spoke in a brisk tone. "Perfect. You're in a good place for me to check you over, Big Mac."

At Chryssa's words, Mackenzie faced them. Her lids drooped and she regarded the three of them with little expression.

"How you feeling, Mackenzie?" Marcus had also gone for the upbeat tone. Adam watched the alpha's personality reaching out toward her. Previously, the strength of the alpha's charisma had been something Mackenzie's own personality had met better than most people who had been shapeshifters from birth. But, the Mackenzie who sat before them dropped her eyes and hunched her shoulders submissively, every line of her body speaking of guilt and shame.

"Let's clean these cuts one more time." Chryssa reached for her medkit and drew out cleaning solutions and fresh dressings. "You'll find healing faster has its upsides and downsides. Wounds not cleaned out thoroughly will heal around foreign matter in the flesh. We got to you nice and early, rinsed everything, so you're healing very well. In fact, the wounds would really heal better if you Shifted fully once or twice to help the process along."

Mackenzie jerked her hand out of Chryssa's loose grip. Fear filled the air with a metallic tang waking all of their beasts. Mackenzie's dark eyes dilated to almost black and then the thin rims of the irises turned golden as her panic brought her cat to the forefront.

"Careful." Marcus' voice and his will rolled over Mackenzie before Adam could speak to calm her. "Get yourself under control before you hurt someone."

Immediately, Mackenzie's eyes returned to dark brown. Still wide with fear, and her scent still stank of it, but she'd locked her beast down.

Chryssa remained still, never having backed away from the potential danger of Mackenzie's cat. "See there, you've got control. There's no need to be afraid for people."

"But I'm a murderer." The sadness in her voice tore at him. Adam wanted to reach out and shake her, to tell her not to hurt anymore.

“Personally,” Chryssa said in a matter-of-fact tone, “I owe you thanks.”

“W-why?” Mackenzie forgot herself and looked straight into Chryssa's eyes.

“Adam is pride. He's family. You took an attack aimed at his unprotected back and you won.” The fierce satisfaction in the gentle healer's voice rang true, reminding everyone in the room, despite her rare gift, Chryssa was still a predator.

The fear faded from Mackenzie's eyes even though she still held them wide. Instead, disbelief had taken fear's place.

“Make no mistake,” Chryssa continued, “the entire pride knows what you did for one of our own, and we are all thankful for it.”

“Truth,” Marcus confirmed.

Mackenzie remained silent, watching them all.

“Now.” Chryssa stood. “You are under pride protection and one of mine to care for. There are several things I need you to do to heal properly. Healer's orders.”

The healer drew Mackenzie off the stool to face her, hand in hand.

“First, you are a shapeshifter fresh off your first heat. Obviously, the bloodletting quenched it.”

Adam cleared his throat and Mackenzie's cheeks flushed a deep red. There had been another interaction before the fighting.

“Or otherwise,” Chryssa amended. The hint of a smile tweaked the corners of Marcus' mouth. “In any case, you are suffering the letdown, it happens after the high of a kill. And at the same time you've got the moodiness following naturally after a strong heat.” Mackenzie flinched, but Chryssa kept her tone clinical and devoid of judgment. “Second, you are a shapeshifter who has never shifted fully. You need to shift to be whole, mentally and physically. It's a part of you now, and you need to spend time in both forms to maintain health. Because you haven't, your condition is degenerating. Third and last, you have too much trauma in your head.”

Chryssa tugged on Mackenzie's hands, drawing Mackenzie close and hugging her.

“To treat all three,” Chryssa said gently, rubbing her cheek against Mackenzie's. “I want you to shift . You need to spend time in your cat form to clear your head. Perspective is different in cat form, simpler. Your head is too full and you can't see your way clear. You're a shifter now, you need to clear your head our way. And then, you need



to spend time with the pride. We heal together, and as wonderful as Adam is, you need more contact.”

Anxiety hung in the air, a vibrant edge, poised but held leashed by Mackenzie. Hesitantly, her hands came up to return Chryssa's hug.

“I don't know if I have enough control.” She made it an honest confession. “And I'm afraid I'll hurt someone again, maybe kill again.”

“I scent no madness in you, Mackenzie.” Chryssa held firm, and her eyes locked Mackenzie's to give her the truth. “I sense you are vulnerable and a predator can't afford to be vulnerable for long, but no madness. The other two reeked of it.”

“What about control?”

“All of the juveniles have to learn control,” Marcus added his own reassurance. “Adam will run with you, and we'll send Liam and Cal along with you for a romp. It'll give them good practice to tussle with your cat.”

“Won't they be mad at me?” Heat returned to Mackenzie's face with embarrassment, remembering the incident at the bonfire.

“Pfff.” Chryssa waved a hand lightly. “Those two are always trying to impress females. It serves them right Adam staked a claim, you're too much for them to handle anyway.”

“They can give you something to take a whack at as you're heading through the forest.” Adam was a little grumpy. “Your cat is full grown, so it'd do them some good to deal with you.”

Mackenzie mulled it over, the anxiety having dissipated as the conversation moved along. Still reluctant, but definitely woken from the half-life she'd been in a few minutes prior.

“I won't hurt them?”

“They've had training.” Marcus didn't seem concerned. “And their dominance is a known quantity. It's not likely you will be able to dominate them both at the same time, but it'll give a decent measure of what you can do all the same. I'll be there supervising too.”

That alone seemed to comfort Mackenzie, surprising Adam. She had little trust in herself, but Adam supposed he shouldn't have been surprised she had faith in the pride. She had a strong sense of family.

Mackenzie chewed on her lower lip as she considered, wrestling with her fears and anxieties. They all gave her time in undemanding silence. Cats knew how to wait patiently. Finally, she seemed to put herself back together again, layer by layer, until she squared her shoulders and looked at them all. "When do I try?"

"Now is good." Marcus grinned, his posture relaxed and unworried.

She gave them all a hesitant smile, and then seemed to remember something. Cocking her head to one side, her delicate brows came together as she thought hard.

All of them leaned forward in concern, and Adam felt another squeeze of anxiety around his heart. "What's the matter, Kitten?"

She looked up, not at Adam, but at Marcus. "Wasn't there supposed to be coffee?"

Shocked silence held for half a heartbeat and then Chryssa, Marcus and Adam all laughed. Mackenzie shifted from one foot to another, shy but game to join in, and yet not quite sure how. Adam covered the distance between them and folded her against his chest, dropping a kiss on the bridge of her nose.

"We'll get you coffee before we start."

"Oh, good."

His Mackenzie had almost completely returned, still a little fragile, but back.

## Chapter 15

An hour later, Mackenzie stood in a small clearing with an audience of children and juveniles. The strength she'd gathered to agree to all of it had been left behind at Adam's home.

"You're sure I won't hurt anyone."

"Positive, now that you've had your coffee." He stood, relaxed, with a hand resting lightly in the curve of her lower back. She drew comfort from it, aware he'd kept up small touches and light contact nonstop since they'd left his home. Grateful for them, she leaned into him.

"I'd have thought this would be easier without an audience." In a way, she embraced the mild flash of irritation she experienced. Being irritated tended to be safer than being afraid.

He leaned close and dropped another kiss on her forehead. "Liam and Cal must have been told somewhere near the kits."

Currently, no less than half a dozen toddlers and small children scampered around Liam and Cal demanding to 'help' train her. They'd taught her to dance, after all, so why not help teach her to shift.

"I am not getting naked in front of all these people."

Chuckling, he held up a knapsack. "Shift in your clothes. I packed you a fresh set for later."

"Are you always like this?"

"Like what?"

"So perfect; I wonder how you're still single."

A large, warm hand curled around the back of her neck, tilting her head as he stole a kiss full of the taste of rich coffee and spice. "I'm not single anymore, Mackenzie."

Silent, she wondered if she would be blushing multiple times an hour for the rest of her life.

"Adam, you giving lessons?" Liam called over. "I need to learn how to do that to a pretty girl."

Adam hand slid from her neck to rest again on the small of her back. "Find a girl your age to practice on and I'll consider it."

"It's going to take some time getting used to this." Mackenzie hid her face in his arm. He looked at her with warm amber eyes. "What, Kitten?"

"PDA. Public displays of affection. It's looked down upon in the city, but here, every member of the pride trades little touches of affection out in public all the time. Like...kisses."

He rumbled deep in his chest, a pleased purr. "Do you like kisses, Kitten?" His hands lightly passed up and down her back in a soft caress. "You know we shapeshifters are possessive. I like giving you kisses so every single male here knows you're with me. Every touch leaves my scent on your clothes, your skin." His lips brushed across her forehead.

Raising up on tiptoe, she pressed her lips against his cheek. "I like kisses." When he looked down at her, a smile playing across his lips, she reached up again and placed a soft kiss on the corner of his mouth. "And I kind of like the idea that everyone knows you're with me, too."

"Let's get to the main event, shall we?" Marcus interrupted with mock impatience, breaking through the warm cocoon of mood they had created.

The blood immediately rushed from her face, leaving her cheeks cold, her eyes darting around to take in everyone there. Marcus and Chryssa stood over the half dozen children as Liam and Cal walked towards the place where she stood with Adam. It was a lot of people to have around. All of them could be targets if she lost of control.

Marcus sympathized with her concerns earlier and had mentioned to Adam his wariness at exposing the kits to the potential danger of an out-of-control shapeshifter, but Chryssa convinced him to let the children stay.

"Mackenzie is the oldest of three and by nature, very nurturing." Chryssa had reasoned. "Her desire to protect her siblings from herself drove her out to seek us. She won't hurt children."

When the healer had a hunch, the alpha rarely overruled her judgment, Mackenzie learned. So, he watched from the sideline and waited, ready for the worst but giving her an encouraging nod.

“Just like we practiced before, Kitten.” Adam said, his hands on her upper arms in a soothing caress. His head bent until he hovered a breath away from her.

She closed her eyes. “I'm trying.”

Claws slid smoothly from her fingertips and bare toes. Her hands shifted partially, caught in the intermediate phase between humanoid and big cat.

“It's not going beyond this.” She strained, her vocal chords caught in the change. Her effort visibly drawing every line of her body taught.

“She's trying too hard,” murmured Chryssa from her place next to Marcus. Mackenzie's hearing was sharper, the tips of her ears aching.

“Hey, Big Mac, like this.” Liam and then Cal each Shifted for her, close enough so she should have been able to feel the energy of the Shift and follow their lead. Her feet had raised onto tip toe and shifted as far as the intermediate phase as well. But from that point, Mackenzie couldn't make progress.

The children milled about impatiently. They murmured amongst each other.

“Stay back or go home,” Marcus growled to them.

“But she needs help.” A little boy with wise eyes made it a statement. Little Sho took the spot as the leader of his age group. Mackenzie had heard Marcus mention to Adam that he'd been keeping an eye on the boy because even at the tender age of ten, he showed incredible potential. “Pride members help each other.”

Fighting tears, Mackenzie kept trying. The alpha felt the energy of the Shift hovering around her, at the brink but out of reach.

“Shifting comes easier for us,” Sho continued with simple child logic. “Adults think too hard about it.”

“That's true, Sho,” Marcus admitted. Most shapeshifters lost the ability to Change instantaneously as they came into adulthood. They couldn't shift on the move and had to focus for a few moments more to take their other form. Only the very good fighters, like Adam, retained the ability to shift with speed. For kittens, it came as easy as breathing.

Sho broke from the group.

Marcus growled, but Chryssa exclaimed, “No! Look! She's controlling herself.”

Turning, Mackenzie watched in growing horror as Sho darted toward her.

Worse, Marcus held back even though under normal circumstances, he'd have lunged for the kit. As alpha, he could be faster than any cat in the pride, and he'd kill Mackenzie before allowing danger to come to the kit.

Sadly, she would have let him.

But Sho had other ideas.

"N-no," Mackenzie raised her hands to ward him off, desperately clamping down on her panic.

Arms outstretched, Sho leaped at Mackenzie, shooting straight through the energy around her and onto her chest, shifting as he did so.

Instinctively she wrapped her arms around the jaguar kitten as his momentum knocked her off her feet. Like the night of the bonfire, she caught him reflexively to keep him safe.

Her heart pounded in panic at the thought of the little kitten harmed. Instinct told her the child shouldn't be within her energy while she was caught between forms and she had to do something with it before it affected the kitten. The energy snapped around her as she fell.

"Mackenzie!" Adam took a step forward, faltered, and fell to one knee.

A tawny gold cat stood over the cub with touches of black and white at her muzzle and the tips of her ears. Her jaw dropped as she panted slightly in distress. She'd shifted, instantaneously.

Sho immediately shifted back to a little boy and wrapped his arms around her very solid neck, "Yay!"

Immediately as one, the children piled on top of the hapless Mackenzie in her big cat form. Marcus let out an exasperated huff.

"She's so smooth, all one color." Sho made the curious comment. The boy's eyes were wide as he studied her. "But she's not black like you are, Adam."

"The southern peninsula panthers used to be called cougars or mountain lions." Adam approached Mackenzie to run a hand over her silken pelt. "They're not the same as the panthers in our pride."

"She's not all one color, Sho!" A little girl protested, bending to crawl under Mackenzie. "Her belly is white like ours."

Mackenzie held perfectly still, her paws planted on the ground as the children danced around her. Afraid of hurting them, she didn't budge.

"She was never a danger to the children," murmured Chryssa to Marcus. "You would have known."

"The cat knew," Marcus admitted with a grunt. "But, the man had his doubts."

Adam shook his head as he walked to Marcus' side, leaving Mackenzie to the mercy of the children temporarily. "This man is humbled by a ten year-old."

Sho grinned at Adam as he threw his little arms around Mackenzie's neck again. "I jumped into her arms before, at the bonfire. She almost shifted then, I felt it. So I figured this time she would, 'cause the tingles were so close anyways."

Mackenzie rumbled, but turned to give Sho a nuzzle against one cheek. He giggled.

"The kid is going to give me white hairs," growled Marcus, but without anger. Mackenzie would have hurt herself before hurting anyone else, obvious in the way she stood with all four legs braced, her paws almost buried in the ground so she didn't accidentally swat a child.

"Enough for now." Marcus rescued her before a child ended up on her back. "It's time to let Mackenzie test out her cat and give her some bigger playmates to roughhouse without here."

A chorus of "awwwwww" met his statement, but the children obeyed, giving Mackenzie a clear space.

She watched all of them, her eyesight even clearer than before and lower to the ground. The tiniest movements attracted her attention, and the breeze teased the tiny hairs on her ears so she felt herself flick one instinctively. Her paws stayed well-grounded in the earth, pads feeling the soil beneath.

Everything she had ever known about balance left her in the shifting. She took her time stretching, getting a feel for the way her cat's body moved.

It rose up out of her core and joined with her. Suddenly, the old Mackenzie faded into memory. Jumbled pieces inside her soul shifted and settled into place. The new

Mackenzie existed as woman and cat, both aspects of the same person. Happiness swept through her as pain she hadn't even recognized ceased.

"Progress." She heard Chryssa say as she walked around the clearing, nudging Sho as she passed by.

"Moves better than most," commented Marcus.

Mackenzie shot him a look. Better than most indeed. She turned and nipped the nearest juvenile, Liam, in the shoulder and took off through the woods. The children squealed in delight.

"Hah! I told you she gets spunky when she gets her tail in a knot." Adam watched the juveniles take off after her. And then he called out. "Stay close by, Kitten!"

Of course she heard him.

Rain drops began to fall as Mackenzie dashed through the forest, letting the cat aspect of her come to the forefront of her awareness. She could hear the two juveniles behind her, immature males. They wouldn't catch her, both aspects of her personality agreed.

Every time one of her paws touched the ground, every time her muscles bunched and stretched, Mackenzie got a feel for her form. Stronger, faster, more powerful than them, she led them on a wild chase. With practice, she'd have grace they couldn't manage.

But she slowed once in a while, letting them almost overtake her. The first couple of times, they managed to shove her and make her stumble. As the run continued, she gained better control. She'd dodge to one side and then reach out with a paw, careful to keep her claws retracted, and bowl one or the other over. Then, she took off again.

Maybe if she'd had more experience in her big cat form, Mackenzie would have noticed the smell despite the rain. Maybe if the two juveniles had been more seasoned, they would have caught it. As it was, the sound alerted her first.

Like the big fans in the city, circulating air, it overlaid the natural sounds of the forest like white noise only more concentrated and quieter. Mackenzie paused in the rain, trying to filter it from the other forest noises still unfamiliar to her. Recognition caught her attention amidst all the others.

Liam and Cal pounced on her. Distracted, she bowled them both over and sat on them, still trying to catch the sound again. Growling, they struggled under her paws, but



Mackenzie growled back. She thought hard about the danger. This time her will rolled over them both as she growled and they went still.

Something wasn't right. She didn't like it. Lying still and finally catching the sound she'd heard, Liam and Cal confirmed with slightly distressed noises. Or at least, her inner cat interpreted their noises for her.

Nudging each of them, she sent them back the way they had come. The forest had gone silent. Alarm shot through Mackenzie.

The boys became streaks of gold and black running through the trees in front of her. Too many targets. Her cat knew another hunter trailed them, and a hunter preferred prey that broke off and singled itself out.

Leaving the boys, she shot in a different direction, hoping to draw the unseen threat away from the juveniles and away from the kittens they returned to.

Desperately, Mackenzie ran, leaving the cat aspect of her personality to navigate the forest as the human part of her thought furiously about all she knew of the strange danger. Adam had told her they hunted in the forests and in the cities alike, with technology alien to either environment. The odds definitely didn't lean in her favor. She didn't know how to be a big cat well enough to hide from the hunter, the forest still unfamiliar.

She cursed mentally, holding in a growl in an effort to run silent. *Too new, too new. Adam's right and he might not get the chance to gloat over it.*

Her inexperience as a shapeshifter became her best hope—the thing would have trouble anticipating her behavior. And so, she acted like a human instead of a shapeshifter. She didn't know how to muddle her trail or hide her scent. Instead, she moved quickly through the trees, weaving as if navigating heavy traffic and congested pedestrian causeways. She made unexpected turns, doubled back on her path and turned again. Her mind overlaid the forest trails with remembered commute paths, keeping the hunter behind her and putting as much distance between them as possible.

Somehow, she sensed the hunter on her trail anyway.

*Bastard. Get caught in a tree or something. Have a break down. Freaking get bent!*

Her endurance flagged and she wouldn't be able to keep running forever. She chose a large tree and climbed, focusing on a thick branch several levels up. Hooking her claws into the bark for stability, she hid as best she could in the cover of leaves.

*Adam, come find me. Please find me.*

Everything fell quiet around her. Bleak thoughts tumbled/crowded her mind as she wondered if she'd be killed or captured. She figured she held little value for the study of shapeshifter behavior. Perhaps if she was taken, she could provide them with as much false, inaccurate information as possible.

*I could buy the pride time, give them an edge. Give Adam a chance to survive against these things...without me.*

She clamped down on her last thought, regretting it immediately. Suddenly, every memory of her time with Adam stood out in sharp relief against her memories. Too few and too late to tell him how much she needed him.

The sound came then, of concentrated air being moved through a small engine. The scent of metal and plastic stung her nostrils, and she flattened herself against the tree branch.

At first the hunter passed her by, she heard him move off to her left a fair distance. Then her luck ran out. The steady hum returned, closing in on her hiding place.

Maybe she could pounce on the hunter as it passed under her. But her luck remained the worst possible. She heard him hover closer, and overhead.

Killed or captured, never to be seen again, Adam had told her. If killed, victims were taken as trophies. If captured, victims disappeared and used in study, which neither the shapeshifters nor the humans had been able to gain more information.

The noise came too close. Mackenzie pondered breaking her cover and attempting to run again. Before she could move, a sharp pain stung her shoulder. In seconds, her body convulsed uncontrollably, and indescribable agony shot through her.

She fell.

The impact with the forest floor barely registered as her body convulsed further. At the outer edge of her peripheral vision, she saw the strange form landing next to her.

A tinny, disembodied voice issued from a speaker on the humanoid hunter's helmet. "Specimen captured."

A pause and the pain stopped as suddenly as it had started, but her body refused to obey her commands.

“Specimen is *Puma concolor coryi*, female, of above-average size. Inconsistent with species of feline found in local environment. Irregularity is of note.”

Heavy, mechanical footsteps approached as she desperately tried to get her body to respond.

Since her body wouldn't move, her mind worked furiously. The hunter obviously spoke in an understandable language, as Adam had mentioned. Its communication technology must be something a knowledgeable tech could hack if they could determine the frequency type. No way a hunter of alien origin could have evolved so closely to human and shapeshifter history that even language would match. There had to be some ancestry between the hunters and the humans and shapeshifters of Mackenzie's world.

As if reading her mind, the hunter squatted until the faceplate came into her line of sight.

“Does the subject comprehend? Blink twice to indicate affirmative.”

She considered whether she should play dumb.

“If subject does not comprehend, subject will be considered to have no value and will be terminated.”

Well then, playing dumb wasn't an option. She blinked twice, finding she had at least that much control.

“Current hypothesis, subject is visiting the local feline population. Is this hypothesis correct?”

Sort of. Mackenzie decided to blink twice. She wouldn't give more information than necessary but obviously she couldn't elaborate even if prompted. She couldn't shift and couldn't speak in cat form.

"Hypothesis confirmed. Situation as expected. Subject is the specimen targeted by the one known as Van. Communication from Van has lapsed."

Van? Van had been working with the hunter to find her. It explained how he'd evaded the pride's patrols. Frustration burned in her. She had no way to get the information back to the pride, especially if she died.

Not a cheerful thought.

"Is the specimen known as Van terminated?"

Mackenzie blinked twice. And good riddance.

"Acknowledged."

She felt a pinch against her pelt and realized the hunter had taken samples of blood and tissue.

"Analysis indicates virus is newly established in nuclei of subject cell tissue. Is subject newly mutated?"

Mackenzie didn't know what else to do, so she blinked twice, answering truthfully.

The hunter stood, lifting a gloved hand to the side of its helmet and speaking into the air again. Mackenzie figured it must be communicating with someone other than herself.

"Hypothesis is confirmed. Data indicates subjects referred to as shapeshifters are still able to transfer virus to mutate original human stock."

Another pause, but Mackenzie sensed a change nearby and hope flared.

"Affirmative. Blood and tissues obtained."

Soon. Mackenzie closed her eyes. Help neared, a raging force silently approaching.

"Affirmative. Current subject is of no further scientific value and will be considered trophy creditable upon termination. IMCL-6002 transmission terminating."

The hunter moved back into Mackenzie's line of sight. He trained a sleek weapon on her, shaped like a gun but made of colored metal with two prongs at the end of the barrel. She ceased to struggle and watched without fear. She had faith.

"Subject does not experience elevated heart rate. Termination is not a trigger for fear?"

Mackenzie stared at the hunter without blinking.

A black shadow streaked out of cover, slamming into the hunter's arm, making him drop the weapon and stumble. Adam stood over her in panther form, shielding her with his body, his menacing growl enough to make his opponent back away another step as it drew a second weapon. With the strange gun trained on Adam, her heart finally jumped and clenched in fear. The hunter could as easily shoot him as he had her, but she couldn't move.

In that one moment, she placed her trust in Adam to protect her, body and soul, woman and cat.

A split second later, death, cloaked in a gold and black pelt, came for the hunter. Marcus landed on the hunter's back, slamming the hunter down to the ground under the weight of his impressive size. A helmet rolled into her view and a voice cried out without the aid of a microphone. Somehow, it sounded much more human as it died.

## Chapter 16

“If we could avoid trouble two whole days in a row, maybe we'd have a chance to decide.”

Orson grunted in response to Marcus' wry comment as the Conservation representative watched Mackenzie walk hand in hand with Adam into the forest.

The girl still moved slightly stilted as she continued to recover from the odd taser weapon used by the hunter. Her paralysis had begun to wear off shortly after she had been brought to Chryssa for care, but full recovery would take an extended time.

Marcus continued his assessment. “She's shifted a couple of times in the last day or so, to help her heal. She can do it at will, without help at this point.”

“No signs of insanity?” Orson remained impassive.

“None.” Marcus kept his tone neutral. “Her scent is clean.”

After a brief silence, Orson commented. “She provided valuable intel on debrief.”

“Yes. She held it together under pressure. If she was going to go mad, it would have been then.”

“She places trust in your Sentinel, and you.”

Marcus shrugged. “She's put her life on the line for the pride. She led the hunter away from two juveniles and a group of kits. She had to know she had no chance to evade the danger.”

“Mackenzie will be added to the registry for your pride in Conservation records.”

Marcus nodded. The alpha didn't waste unnecessary words, satisfied with the assurance of Mackenzie's safety.

“We've gained a lot of data from the remains of the equipment on the hunter. It's too bad most of it self-destructed after he died. What samples we obtained on blood and tissue will be analyzed, but the scientists say the explosion might have damaged the samples. They'll study what they can.” Orson didn't question killing the hunter before there had been any chance of an interrogation. Shapeshifters were passionate beings, and the pride placed no blame on the alpha for eliminating a danger to one of his own. “You and your people are lucky the self-destruct had limited damage radius.”

“Two attacks in my territory, at this point.” Marcus brooded over the obvious implication. They would be seeing more hunters in the future.

“No casualties.” Orson countered. “It could be worse. Several non-predatory herds have suffered casualties from hunters all over the northern continent. Human law enforcement has shared several case files likely to be hunter strikes in the cities.”

Marcus flexed his claws. “This pride will be ready if they decide to hunt in our territory again.” He paused, then added, “You have several of our Enforcers assigned to help investigate the cases in the human cities. Any leads for them?”

“Perhaps one. I will keep you posted.”

“The Sentinels have decided on a new nickname for you.”

Adam watched as Mackenzie paused, stooping to pick a few leaves of mint before continuing with him on their easy walkies through the forest.

“Big Mac entertained us for a while.” He shrugged. “But only when Mack was around. It doesn't really fit you.”

“Okay,” She said slowly.

He grinned, making her wait for his punch line. “You don't want to guess?”

“You don't want to be nice and tell me?” She batted her lashes up at him as she leaned forward, squeezing her upper arms together against her sides a little, enough to enhance her cleavage.

His eyes dropped to the neckline of her shirt. “Bribery works every time.”

“Oh good, otherwise, I might have had to resort to treachery.”

He cleared his throat and adjusted his pants, and not surreptitiously. “They've decided to start calling you 'Trouble'.”

“Aw, hey.” She stopped in her tracks immediately. “It's been a whole day since anything happened anyone could even remotely trace back to me.”

He shook his head. “Not true. Liam and Cal are close buddies now, because of their thwarted rivalry over you. They're causing all sorts of havoc. The Sentinels have decided it's your fault since the damage from them before you came along was limited to simple

pissing contests and teenage romantic conquests. They've developed a taste for older women, now.”

She stepped right up to him. “Look, I made it clear from the beginning, I had no interest.”

He wrapped his arms around her, grinning as she fussed in his arms. Oh, but he loved her fiery personality, full of light and tempered by enough shadow for her to embrace his without fear. “Only no interest?”

“Obviously, I seem to have your name stamped all over me, so it's not like the field is clear for anyone, anyway.” Her matter-of-fact tone came across without hesitation and maybe even a little bit cheerful.

“Heh, there’s an idea.” Adam rested his chin on her forehead. “Besides scent, we could always look into a tattoo for you.”

“Yeah, no. Let's not.”

He cupped her face in his hands, pausing to drink in the sweet purity before bending to kiss her. He took his time brushing his mouth over hers, smiling as she nipped him impatiently. When he pressed his lips firmly against hers, she gave him entrance and he tasted the honey and spice of her.

Heat ignited between them and a rumble rose up from his chest as her hands reached up around his neck and buried themselves in his hair. He freed her, smiling as she gasped. Following the line of her neck, he left a searing string of kisses across her skin before he bit gently against the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder.

“Maybe one tattoo,” she whispered, nipping his ear.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her enough to carry her off the path and into a little sheltered grove. “Where?”

She smiled at him with heavy lidded eyes. “Somewhere only you'd ever see.”

His cat purred in approval, obviously liking that idea. His hands wandered over her body, caressing and gently squeezing over her behind, making her lean into him. The soft promise of her breasts pressed against his chest made him hungry. “Narrows down the choices. Let's see.”

He kissed her deeply, until her knees began to give way, exploring her sweet mouth and caressing her tongue with his as his hands continued their proprietary exploration.



As her knees buckled, he caught her weight and settled her on the fragrant carpet of clover covering the floor of the little hideaway.

“There's here.” He nuzzled the deep crease of her cleavage. He lifted her shirt off, trailing his fingertips across the honey bronze of her skin. He didn't wait to take off her bra, instead freeing her breasts from the constricting cups and tickling the delicate skin with the rough stubble across his chin. He liked the way the bra still held them, perfectly presented for his enjoyment. He bent to nuzzle the curve under each full breast.

She squealed quietly. “Remember someone has to actually draw the tattoo there.”

He growled. “No one touches you there.” He grasped the other breast, gripping it just enough to elicit a groan from her.

She kissed his neck, licking the small hollow above his chest. “Unless you know how to make lasting tattoos, we might be out of luck then.”

He bent to take a pink nipple into his mouth, teasing it with his tongue until it tightened, then sucked firmly. He eased the grip of his hand, cupping her other breast, brushing teasing circles over the generous handful.

She tugged at his light T-shirt. He chuckled against her breast, lightly grazing his teeth against her nipple. The sound of ripping fabric rent the air and he realized she'd torn it in her impatience.

“Would you trust me to put a needle to your skin?” Said lightly, his voice husky. It would take more time for her to heal from the wounds on her soul left behind by Van, but every act of trust became another victory.

She stilled beneath him and he prepared to lift himself off of her, not willing to press her if she still needed space. But those little hands spread across his back, holding him close. She buried her face in his bare chest, rubbing her cheek against the light dusting of hair. “Maybe not a needle.”

He waited, his cat hunting still.

“But you said a mating would leave a mark, and it wouldn't fade.”

Joy burst across him, and Adam suddenly breathed free. His heart hammered, threatening to burst from his chest.

“Are you sure, Kitten?”

She nodded against his chest, and then she lifted her face and offered her mouth again, her plump lips slightly parted. He kissed her, drinking in the sheer vitality of the delicate girl in his arms with so much strength hidden beneath the surface.

The kiss went on, long and lingering, a dance between the two of them. When it ended, he raised himself up on his elbows, leaning over her.

“Freely chosen, right?” When she nodded, Adam used a claw to open a cut over his heart. He let his blood run and touched his claw to her chest, above the swell of her breast over her own heart.

She looked up at him with absolute trust, no fear. “Freely chosen.”

He touched his claw to her then, carefully parting her silken skin. He caught the drops of blood with his tongue, sucking gently at the rich copper taste. Gently, so gently, he nipped her, taking a tiny bit of flesh.

“Forever?”

“All the time in the world. Forever and ever,” she whispered. He watched her solemnly as she repeated his actions, taking a taste of his blood and a bit of flesh. She looked up at him then, eyes bright with the power flowing between the two of them, shapeshifter power. “You promised.”

He nodded. “Once I take you, there won't be anyone else.”

“I don't want anyone else.”

They sealed the mating with a kiss. This one held a deep urgency, and he didn't wait longer to meet their mutual need. In a few heartbeats, their clothes had been tossed aside and they lay skin to skin, along the lengths of their bodies.

He kissed his way down to the sweet heat between her legs, pausing to let a hot breath puff over the skin of her outer lips. The scent of her arousal rushed over him, heady and intoxicating. He dipped his head and let his tongue dart, his hands shifting to hold her hips as she jerked and cried out.

In a swift move, he gripped her thighs and pressed them up and apart giving himself unrestricted access to her deep rose folds. He feasted then, licking and suckling as she writhed in his grip. He grinned as he nibbled and probed every sensitive fold. He looked up the length of her body as he made her dance, watching the rise and fall of her full

breasts. Massaging her thighs as he held them, he ran his tongue in firm, long strokes until she called out an inarticulate plea.

Damn, but he loved the sound of her arousal.

Still grinning, he darted his tongue into her entrance in a wicked tease and then nibbled his way up to the tiny hooded center of her pleasure. He used the tip of his tongue to circle her clitoris with firm pressure.

She began to arch her back, tense and full of need. Her thighs jerked under his hands and he could see her stomach flatten as she neared climax.

He grazed her with his teeth as he ran his finger along her entrance, rewarded by hot wetness. Running his tongue against her on another long stroke, he clamped his lips over her clit and slid a finger inside the deep heat of her.

“Adam!”

She came in the shelter of his hands and mouth as he gently stroked her through her orgasm. She lay trembling, covered in a fine sheen of sweat as she came down from the intensity. Throbbing with the need to be inside her, he rose up and covered her with his own body.

"I need to feel you inside me." Beautiful eyes devoured him, deep brown with a ring of gold. Completely with him, she looked up at him, woman and cat.

Her hands slid over his waist and urged him, spreading across his back. He nudged the tip of his erection against her entrance and she gasped, reaching up hungrily to kiss him. He gave her his mouth and then slowly slid into her.

She arched to meet him, her head falling back, her silken hair cascading away from flushed cheeks, revealing the beauty of her face. Tiny muscles deep inside her clutched his entire length, and Adam groaned. She was hot and tight all around him.

“Forever,” she whispered.

Adam licked the tiny wound already closing on her chest, confident it would mark her for a lifetime. “Forever.”

And then he began to move inside her. A low noise came from her throat as she buried her head against his shoulder. His entire focus narrowed to the feel of her body under his and the feel of his cock moving inside her. Slow at first, he rocked against her,

grinding his hips into hers, penetrating deeper and deeper. She wrapped her legs around his waist, a perfect fit for him, tight and able to take his entire length.

Her wet heat clenched around him, her body ready for another climax. He held her down at the hip, pulling back until the tip of his penis teased at her entrance.

She made a frustrated noise, trying to encourage him with hands and legs. He chuckled.

"Damn it, Adam." She bared her teeth and snarled at him.

He drove inside her, burying himself to the hilt. He caught her cry with a deep kiss, plundering her mouth as he plunged into her welcoming heat again and again. Her body clenched around his length and her back arched under him as she came, driving him past any remaining control. He came, riding the crest of pleasure with her.

Both their wounds had closed by the time they lay side by side, hidden by sheltering shrubs and trees. Mackenzie lightly traced the new scar forming a slight crescent on Adam's skin.

It wasn't like other scars, puckered and ugly. It curved in a clean line over his heart. Hers looked the same and peace came with the thought. She savored his warmth, wrapping her in love and safety.

He would protect her for all of forever they had together. The certainty of it supported by the new awareness singing between them, a song only the two of them could hear, created by threads of melody and harmony from each of them.

Van had taken her blood without her consent, while his song had whispered like ice in her veins, a tenuous beat clashing with the rhythm of her heart.

Adam must have sensed the remembered echo in their own song, because he smiled at her and dipped his head to kiss the mark he'd given her. Love washed through her, banishing the dead man's touch from her skin, her heart, and her soul.

Finally, her curiosity came to the forefront and she broke the happy silence between them. "Aren't these supposed to be where people can see them? I thought the point was for people to know we belong to each other."

"These are for us." He released her and then tucked a stray hair behind her ear when she lifted her face to him. "Everyone knows anyway."

“What, that we're together?” She looked up into his eyes, amber ringed in gold. Both the man and the cat returned her gaze, both complete and happy.

“That you are my heart.”

Heat and joy bloomed in her face, rising across her cheeks. Finding the words that would make him whole, she whispered, “And you're my Sentinel.”

## *ABOUT THE AUTHOR*

Born and raised in the Northeast, PJ Schnyder spent her childhood pretending to study for the SAT's by reading every fantasy and sci-fi novel she could borrow from the local and school libraries. She scored fairly high in the verbal portion.

PJ was introduced to the wonderful world of romance a decade later by her best friend at an anime convention in Seattle.

She now lives somewhere temperate, watching the seasons go by with her two dogs and super stealthy ninja kitty, writing her stories.

You can visit PJ at her website:

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