

Decadent Publishing



The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement (including infringement without monetary gain) is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Please purchase only authorized electronic editions and do not participate in, or encourage, the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Kya's King
Copyright © 2010 by Becca Dale
ISBN: 978-1-936394-31-9
Cover art by Dara England

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work, in whole or in part, in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by Decadent Publishing Company, LLC
Look for us online at:
www.decadentpublishing.com

Kya's King

Book One of the Sanctuary Series

Becca Dale

~DEDICATION~

To my fantastic critic partners who encourage me even when I want to give up on myself. I love you ladies.

Chapter One—Finding Kya

The moon hung a mere sliver in the night sky, barely breaking the darkness as Ja moved beyond the animal enclosures. Kya lay inside a brick building. Strange, she did not sleep in the open air among the other animals, as her true nature dictated. Night creatures greeted him, howled his name, and warned of her vulnerability, but he waved them quiet. He stepped through the garden door into her bedroom. She sprawled naked on her sleeping pallet. Long, tawny hair spread across the white pillowcase like satin embroidery and lean, well-defined muscles confirmed her feline heritage despite her pale, hairless state. If Dar found her like this, she would be easy prey.

Ja eased his weight onto the edge of the mattress. Blond-tipped lashes flickered against her softly rounded cheekbones, though she did not waken. Tiny freckles, he remembered from her childhood, dusted her upturned nose and highlighted her more catlike features, but her resemblance to the little girl in his memories ended with the small dots of pigment. Her full bottom lip pouted, begging him to taste it, and his body tightened in response. Kya exuded an artless sexuality he had not expected from one raised outside the clan. Her skin, velvet smooth beneath the sensitive pads of his fingers, increased his need. She licked her lips in her sleep, drawing his attention to the tip of her pink tongue as it peeked from her slightly open mouth. Lust, hot and heavy, pulsed in his groin at the thought of teasing it with his own.

He covered her sensuous lips with his, claiming her even as she slept. With a satisfied purr, her tongue met and parried his. Cool amber eyes flashed then closed, but her hands clutched at his arms braced on either side of her shoulders. He shifted his legs between her silky thighs and fought the urge to bury himself within her gorgeous body even as she slept. *Will she know me if she wakes or scream in horror at the stranger in her*

bed? Closing his mind to the later possibility, he nibbled the slender curve of her neck, the tiny shell of her ear, the delicate arch of her brow. Each feathering kiss fed the desire to claim her. The scent of honey and cinnamon radiated from her pale skin. Her natural perfume swamped his senses, drawing him closer, demanding he protect what belonged to him by royal command.

A possessive growl escaped his chest as he explored lower to the delicate pulse at the base of her throat. Her taste settled on his tongue, clean and fresh. The soft curves of her human form encouraged haste, but Ja's need to discover every delicate inch required a more leisurely pace. He paused to tease her breasts, nipping gently at each tight, little nipple. He sucked one small mound into the cavern of his eager mouth. His tongue worshiped the raised nub, sliding over and around until she moaned and lifted toward his touch.

Her fingers sank into his hair and tugged him closer, begging for more.

He gave in a desperate attempt to earn her pleasure. He tightened his hands around her breasts and kneaded delicately as he blew across the flesh, moist from his kiss. Goose bumps rose on her arms, and a shiver chased them over her fair skin. Ja groaned. He loved her uninhibited response, loved the way her body trembled and her scent deepened as passion escalated. "That's it, little one. Feel me."

He wandered lower to her flat abdomen, and her hands followed, fingers messaged his scalp and urged him toward her need. He traced the generous curve of her hip and the narrow valley that led to her core. Her thighs parted in welcome. His tongue stroked her labia as he sucked the moist, swollen folds into his mouth. His own pleasure escalated. He sank two fingers into her already slick vagina. Warm, wet, intoxicating; she drew him in. Preliminary tremors made her inner walls clench and quiver against the invasion. Ja stroked deeper, slid in and out in of her tight little slit in a sensuous pre-mating dance until she whimpered in need.

He rose to his knees and pressed her legs wide. Taking her during her fertile cycle would protect her. Not even Dar would dare attack a female in

sacred condition. Still he hesitated, inches from their joining. Every cell in his body craved the connection, but, right or not, he would not possess her without consent. Impatient with his own nobleness, he caught her face in his hands. "Awake, Kya. Open to me."

She stretched and shivered beneath him. His cock jumped; longing intensified. A searing ache ignited in his groin and burned through his mind, destroying patience. He had to be inside her. He grew restless waiting for her to recognize him. His mouth took hers once more, demanding she acknowledge him, while his hand sought the tempting flesh of her core. His tongue slid between her lips and mimicked his fingers as he teased her slick heat.

When he glanced upward to gage her reaction, her lashes fluttered open. Her refined features and fair complexion gave her an innocent look that enraged him. Frailty suggested weakness. Still, her vulnerability made him hesitate. He caught her hair in his fist and tugged her head back. "You belong to me."

She held his gaze without flinching. A startling strength smoldered in her eyes, daring him to claim her, to mark her as his forever with his seed.

He recaptured her mouth in an insistent kiss as he shifted his hips and pressed forward in a slow thrust. Her wet slit stretched in welcome, but did not yield completely. A small cry slipped from her throat, and she arched beneath him. He stilled, offering her time to adjust. She felt too tight, too new. He could not hurt her despite the urgency to claim what belonged to him before he lost it forever.

As soon as her muscles relaxed, she snarled impatiently. Her fingernails sank into his flesh as she tilted her hips and tried to coax him deeper.

With a chuckle he sat back on his heels and lifted her astride his hips. "Say it, Kya."

She hesitated a moment before her legs clutched his thighs. She did not act coy to flatter his ego. Her steady gaze held his. "I belong to you."

He grunted and thrust upward until he seated his dick fully inside her beguiling body. He rocked her hips and ground his pelvis hard against her

tiny clit. “Again. Give me my name from your lips. I belong to you, Ja.”

She arched backward over his hands, writhing upon him, her words little more than a whisper. “I belong to you, Ja. I want you.”

The final shred of chivalry died. He explored her tender flesh roughly, impatient to make her burn. Tremors shivered through her slender limbs, fueling his passion higher. Her eager whimpers filled his mouth as he captured her swollen lips beneath his. Desire blocked everything beyond her touch and feel. She bucked wildly against his aching cock. The puckered skin of her nipples rubbed across his chest, and heat seared through him. He caught one pert tip between his teeth and explored it with his tongue. Preliminary shockwaves rattled along his nerves. Blind need destroyed finesse. Her muscles flexed beneath his palms as she rose and fell upon him. Her fingers tightened on his biceps. Craving intensified. In tiny incoherent sobs, she pleaded as he played her clitoris. He worked the delicate bud firmly, rotating the pad of his thumb against the sensitive flesh.

She thrashed in his arms, lifting closer and pulling away in fitful spurts. “Please...oh please.”

He stilled her restless movements, one open palm pressed on her lower back keeping her close while the other steadied her for his thrusts. “Accept me, Kya. You’re mine to protect.”

She buried her hands in his hair, acknowledging his dominance, but her tight grip demanded he recognize her own strength as well. “I can’t take much more. I want—”

He pulled her slender form flush to his as her orgasm hit. She convulsed in his arms, his name repeated on her lips in enticing, erratic gasps.

Without warning a white blankness swept across his mind, freezing all sensation moments before it exploded again, primitive and fierce. Violent shudders arched his back and shook his muscles. With a feral roar, he dropped her to the mattress, pressing his groin hard against hers. He sank his sharp eyeteeth deep into her shoulder, keeping her in place beneath him while his seed flooded her fertile womb in hot spurts and marked her as his alone.

Chapter Two—Hannah's World

"I'm losing it, Malachi." Hannah dropped to the cool cement in front of the wounded panther's cage. Strange, green eyes stared back, unblinking. His gaze burned with intense emotion. Whether hatred or merely distrust, she could not tell. "I heard a man calling outside my room, again. Funny huh, me hearing voices? I'm the one who laughs at the tales of monsters and werewolves lurking in these woods."

Hannah laid her head against the high brick wall surrounding the cat compound with a sigh. Her fingers instinctively stroked the tiny puncture marks that had marred her throat since the night before Malachi's arrival. Too many unexplainable things had happened over the past week, things which made her question even the most ordinary event. People did not awaken from erotic dreams marked by fantasy lovers. Strange voices that no one else heard did not rouse normal people from their sleep. And animals did not communicate their displeasure through human eyes.

"This place has gone weird, Malachi."

The black cat growled from behind the steel bars, protesting his captive state. The irony of the refuge did not escape her: Creatures locked up to be free. Hannah blushed beneath the feline's uncompromising scrutiny. "I know you want out of there, my beautiful friend, but your day will come. As soon as you're well, Dr. Ferris will arrange your release in a game reserve where you can live out your life without fear. Concentrate on eating and quit resisting the vets. Can you do that for me?"

"Talking to the animals, again, Hannah?"

With a smile, Hannah shifted to make room for Dr. Grant Ferris as he settled against the wall beside her. "As long as they don't start talking back, I'm in good shape."

"We can't save them all. This one especially." Grant slid his arm around her shoulders, and she leaned against his fatherly comfort. "Harry says the cat's allergic to tranquillizers. We could restrain him, but I can't risk the

harm he could do to the volunteers or the damage the stress might do to him. I'm concerned. If that wound goes untreated much longer, Malachi will lose the leg, or worse."

Hannah sat straighter and wrapped her arms around her knees as worry clenched her stomach. "Isn't there someone who might know more about wildcats than Harry does?"

"Harry already called around. The cat specialist can't be here until Friday. I'm not sure we can wait that long." The elderly vet patted her leg then chuckled as Malachi growled possessively. "He obviously likes you. Convince him to let us help, will you?"

"I'll try."

"That's all I can ask." Grant rose to his feet. An odd look flitted over his weathered features as he studied Malachi. "Trust her, boy. She won't disappoint you."

Hannah watched as Grant disappeared into the darkness. The eccentric old man had started the sanctuary nearly fifty years before and had fought to make it one of the most respected rehabilitation centers in the nation. Most people didn't know it existed. Many of those who did refused to enter through the gates. Stories of animal ghosts, shapeshifters, and other nightmare-based boogiemen had sent volunteers and curiosity seekers alike scurrying.

"Maybe Grant started the rumors to keep people away. What do you think, Malachi?" Hannah rose, edging close to the safety line to study the beautiful creature. His black coat, dulled by dirt and blood, failed to gleam like it should have and his pace had slowed since he had arrived. "Your shoulder's getting worse. You need to let us help you. Please. I don't want to see you spend your life in a zoo or, worse, have to be put down."

"Why do people say it like that?"

Startled, Hannah spun, backing toward the cat's cage and away from the bodiless voice.

A dark figure sprang from the shadows and swept her into powerful arms. "Have you lost your mind? Never get that near to a wounded animal,

no matter how helpless it may seem.”

Hannah shoved from the stranger's embrace. He loomed nearly a foot taller than she did, making him around six four and intimidating as hell. Her heart drummed, but she stood her ground with hands on her hips and glared. “I am fully aware of safety procedures. If you hadn't scared the shit out of me, I wouldn't have gotten so close. I'm not stupid.”

The tall, dark-haired man merely lifted an eyebrow before turning toward the cage. He moved with feline grace and a cold shiver raced up her spine. “What's wrong with the pussycat?”

“Someone shot him. Most likely Malachi grew too big. His keeper probably didn't have a license for an exotic so he took the cat into the forest to eliminate him. He's lucky to have survived.”

“That's a damned shame.”

The venom in the man's tone negated real compassion, and a half smile curled his full lips into a snarl. Foreboding welled in her stomach without reason. She shook it off, choosing to take his comment at face value instead. “The act of caging any wild beast for personal pleasure is selfish and ignorant to begin with. Fortunately, a local game warden found Malachi and brought him here. Unfortunately, he almost died of cardiac arrest from the tranquilizer dart. Now he's developed an infection because no one can get close to him. Poor baby.”

“Pain keeps him from letting down his guard.” The stranger chuckled condescendingly as he leaned toward the cage. “Isn't that right, kitty cat? You're a big old pussy when it comes to tough guy stuff.”

Malachi grew agitated, his pacing more deliberate despite the obvious discomfort it caused him. Hannah looked at the man beside her. Something seemed familiar about him. The security light shone on his face, highlighting long black hair swept back and caught in a strip of leather at the base of his neck. The severe style emphasized his chiseled Native American features. She had seen him somewhere before, but as he turned toward her, his onyx eyes sent a shiver down her spine. Frightening intensity offset his dark good looks. “Who are you?”

“A friend of the animals.”

“Bullshit.” Hannah hated the term Grant had given the volunteers. Although most had good hearts, many were nothing more than attention seekers hoping to gain prestige as humanitarians. “If you were a volunteer, I’d know you. Everyone’s application comes across my desk for approval.”

“I never said I was a volunteer.”

“You implied—fine, if you’re not a volunteer, then you have no business here.”

“I make it my business to help fellow creatures.” He turned back to stare at Malachi. “I would hate to see such a noble animal destroyed.”

The casual comment sounded like a threat. Hannah’s stomach tightened. She wanted the man away from Malachi’s cage. He made her uncomfortable, for no obvious reason, and Malachi looked ready to pounce, despite the steel bars between them.

“We need to go. We’re upsetting the cat.” Hannah stepped to the side of the path and gestured toward the gate. If the man refused to leave, she would alert Grant and have him take care of it. The stranger hesitated then reluctantly yielded to her command. As she followed him, Hannah cast Malachi a final look. The beautiful cat stood on alert, its entire body rigid. “Good night, Malachi. Sleep well.” She locked the gate behind her to ensure the stranger could not return.

Hannah watched the man disappear into the night before she turned toward her cabin and ran smack into a solid chest. She screamed as strong arms kept her from falling.

“Shh, it’s just me, Hannah.”

She stepped back to stare into the shiny, chocolate eyes of the night watchman, Ryan Jones. His beautiful, ebony skin almost disappeared in the darkness. “You scared the crap out of me, Ryan.”

His smile flashed as he chuckled softly. “Sorry, I heard voices.”

Hannah looked over her shoulder. “There’s some guy sneaking around. Could you keep an eye out, especially around the cat enclosure? Malachi doesn’t seem to like him much.”

He smiled and patted her back like he always did, as if she were five instead of twenty-five. "You get some sleep. I'll take care of your cat."

"Thanks. You're a prince."

"Get on home now so I don't have to worry about you, too."

"I'm going." Ryan would keep Malachi safe. No one would stand a chance against the gentle giant. Impulsively, she turned back and hugged him once more. "Thanks, again."

Strong arms circled her back in a solid, brotherly embrace. "Anything for you, little girl, you know that."

And she did. For the past six years, the refuge had been her home. Grant had become a surrogate father after the death of her beloved parents, and the men who worked for him had adopted her as a little sister. Only two other women worked in the entire complex: Harry's wife, Lynn, and Grant's secretary, Kate, but Hannah rarely saw either of them.

Drawing a breath of cool night air deep in her lungs, she entered her cabin, confident that all would be well in the morning. No one and nothing would get past the watchful eye of her family. A delicious shudder ran through her as the thought triggered images of the dark lover who had come to her in the night. She touched the mark he'd left behind on her neck. She could not remember his features clearly, only impressions: long, dark hair, a strong jaw, and hypnotic green eyes. "He was a dream, Hannah, nothing but an incredibly hot dream."

If she told herself that often enough, she might even believe.

Chapter Three—Saving Malachi

A huge cat crouched at the edge of the trees. His hot stare swept across her hungrily. Her breath came in tiny gasps as she tried to calm herself. If she fled, he would see her as prey and pounce. If she remained still, he might allow her to live.

Mine.

The beast had not spoken, but she heard its whisper all the same—the voice of her dream lover, the man who had come to her only once but had changed her forever.

Come to me, Kya.

“What do you want from me?” She felt foolish asking the question. Surely, the command in her head could not have come from the cat. It was the remnant of an erotic fantasy, nothing more.

Don't trust him.

“Who?”

The panther growled low with warning. Emotion she could not pinpoint distorted his sharp features and her heart tightened. She had the ridiculous urge to run to him, to ease his distress and make him purr.

The sleek animal faded farther into the trees. Clear, green eyes begged her to follow. *Malachi*. Had he escaped? He would not survive injured as he was. She started after him, calling his name, pleading with him to come back, but she could not move.

She sat up in bed with a jerk, Malachi's name on her lips. Tangled, sweat-soaked sheets trapped her in place. She ran a trembling hand through her hair, seeking clarity. “It was only a dream, Hannah.” Even as she said the words, she felt the lie. It had been as real as the sexual fantasy the week before. The powerful cat may not have entered her room physically, but he had been there none the less.

The clock read three in the morning. She had to be at work in five hours, but she could not go back to sleep without confirming Malachi's safety.

Afraid he would smell her fear, she dashed through the shower. Hot water and Ivory soap destroyed the nightmare's physical effects but did little to calm her rioting nerves. She slipped into a T-shirt and cutoffs before she sneaked from the rangers' quarters and ran to the cat compound.

Ryan lifted his hand in greeting as she passed the front gate. She waved to assure him she was alone but did not stop to talk.

Malachi prowled his pen, on alert as always.

"Hey there, big guy, I dreamed of you tonight. At least, I think it was you. What do you think of that?" She crept closer, careful not to get within reach of his huge paws. "Did you call me?"

Hannah chuckled. "Grant would have me hauled out of here as a nut job if he heard me talk like that." She sat down on the very edge of the safety zone, wiping her moist palms against her denim shorts. "I had to be sure you were safe."

The cat paced back and forth a few more times before he settled in front of her, stretching his long body on the hard concrete with a weary sigh. He had broken his wound open again, and blood trickled down his right front leg.

"Oh, Malachi, what are we going to do with you?" The need to touch him through the bars sent her forward, though such an action could be suicide. "I wish I could help."

Malachi eased closer to the cage's edge and reached out with his paw as if to comfort her. The image made Hannah smile.

Help me.

The voice from her dream floated from the cage. Malachi's eyes held hers without wavering. Hannah looked around for someone playing tricks on her, but the night remained still, eerily quiet, as it had been every night since the big cat arrived. "Who's out there?" No one answered her call. She strained to see beyond the dim circle of the yard light. Nothing moved.

Help me, Hannah.

Fear edged its way into her thoughts. Unconsciously, she slid toward the big cat to protect him. Her hand brushed the back of his massive paw.

Malachi did not move. She crawled a little closer. The putrid smell of infection drifted from his open sore. "Do you trust me, Malachi?"

He lay still as she reached carefully through the bars and patted his neck gently. With a shaky laugh, she pulled her hand back, glad it remained on the end of her arm.

"Maybe we should try this alone, you and I, huh?" She considered the insanity of the idea only a moment before she ran to the medical lab and gathered the necessary equipment. She had never treated an animal by herself but had assisted Harry often enough to feel confident in what she was doing.

Within moments she stood outside Malachi's cage once more. The cat lay as she had left him. On her knees, so as not to frighten him, Hannah inched across the safety line and sat next to the animal's outstretched paw. She readied the antiseptic on a clean cloth and laid out bandages and antimicrobial solution. "Are you ready for this?" With a shaky smile, she gently patted his leg. "I hope so, because I'm not sure I am." Her hand shook as she picked up the cloth. "Don't eat me, okay?"

Malachi made a sound much like a chuckle before he laid his head back, offering her free access to his wound.

"Well, you're cooperative tonight. Why can't you act this way for Harry? He wouldn't intentionally hurt you. Trust is a hard thing to give, though, isn't it?" She kept a steady stream of soft words flowing around the cat as she cleansed the wound. "I need more light. I can't see how bad the infection is. With luck the penicillin shots Harry has shoved through the bars have helped some." Frustrated, she poured antiseptic directly on the open wound.

Malachi snarled and leaped away.

Expecting the cat to attack, Hannah scurried behind the safety line with a startled cry. He returned looking almost ashamed of his weakness and lay down again. After a few deep breaths to calm her thundering pulse, she crawled to him and stroked his head sympathetically. "You've been very patient, big guy. Trust me a little longer. I'm almost done."

She palpated around the wound with care, trying to determine if she had removed the puss she had seen earlier. When she pushed on the edge near the top of his shoulder, Malachi glared and tossed his head. The movement rippled through his shoulder and her hand touched a hard spot beneath the skin. "Is that the bullet?" She had to wiggle part way inside the cage to access the top portion of the open sore, but she could feel the slug's distinct outline. It had worked its way nearly to the surface. The position offered her vulnerable throat to the big cat's vicious fangs, but she could not leave the offending object there.

"Will you let me take it out? It'll hurt like hell, but you'll feel better once it's gone."

Malachi lay still. Only the tips of his ears twitched anxiously.

"All right." She blew out a steadying breath and prayed he wouldn't lash out in his pain. "Here we go, big guy." Hannah carefully worked her fingers beneath the bullet and pulled with steady pressure. Malachi growled. His shoulder muscles jumped beneath her hands, but he did not move otherwise. When the bullet broke loose, puss oozed from the wound in a red and white stream. Her stomach lurched. Fighting the urge to gag, Hannah pressed against the reddened flesh until the blood ran clear.

"Oh, thank God." She sat back with a sigh. "I think I got it all. At least I hope so." Her hands shook as she washed the infected area once more and spread salve on the wound. "I suppose this should be sewn shut so it doesn't scar, but I can't be sure it's clean." She spoke more to herself than the cat. Malachi wanted to feel better. He didn't care if he had a scar. "You wouldn't put up with me wielding a needle anyway, would you?"

Applying a dressing proved difficult. Finally, Malachi rose and stood broadside. She wrapped the gauze around his shoulder and leg to keep the sterile pad in place. The big cat tipped his head and rubbed against her in gratitude. Tears burned her eyes as she carefully tied a knot to hold the bandage together. "There. Harry could have done a better job, but at least cleaning it should help." Her hand glided across Malachi's back. Long, sleek muscles rippled beneath his hide. Such raw power should have frightened

her but didn't. "Thank you for your trust, big guy."

Hannah stayed with her patient until he settled down. Once his breathing grew even with sleep, she returned the remaining supplies to the medicine cabinet and threw the soiled cloths in the garbage. She slipped back into her room two hours after she'd left. Her alarm would go off in two more, but the cool sheets called to her, coaxing her to relax a few minutes after the stress of tending a wounded animal without sedation. With an exhausted sigh, she crawled onto the mattress and stared at the wooden slates in the ceiling. She could have died, should have perhaps for being so foolish.

"No one in her right mind approaches a wild animal, especially a wounded one, Hannah."

The personal lecture could not wipe the smile from her face nor erase the feeling of accomplishment as she closed her eyes. An amazing creature had allowed her to touch him without repercussions.

Malachi trusted her. How could she ask for more?

Chapter Four–Darrack Jensen

Hannah sat up with a start. Someone banged on her door. Disorientated, she took a moment to gather her thoughts. The night before must have been a dream. Surely she wasn't stupid enough to approach a wounded wildcat, no matter how much she wanted him to get better.

The pounding resumed.

"I'm coming!" She rolled out of bed and grabbed for her robe before realizing she still wore her shorts and T-shirt. Confused, she hung the housecoat back on its hook then hurried across the room. "Sorry, I was getting dressed."

She opened the door without looking to see who was on the other side. The stranger from the night before greeted her with a lopsided smile. On any other man it might have been disarming or at least sort of cute, but cold arrogance rolled off him in waves and destroyed the illusion of charm. "What do you want?"

"Dr. Ferris said I might find you here. It seems you were right. If I am to help the wounded cat, I need to go through you. Hannah, is it?"

The idea that she should know him nagged. "It's Ranger Hall, and I have no intention of allowing you anywhere near Malachi. You might as well pack up and return to whatever rock you crawled from under."

For a fleeting second something evil flashed in his eyes before he blinked. It disappeared. "I think we got off on the wrong foot, Ranger Hall. I didn't mean to upset you last night." He held out his hand with another sideways smile. "I'm Dr. Jensen, the cat specialist. Dr. Ferris told you I was coming, remember? Call me Darrack." His gaze shifted to the side when she ignored his outstretched hand.

"Grant said you weren't coming until Friday. It's only Tuesday." Suspicion overrode her trusting nature. Why hadn't he identified himself before?

"Did you want me to come back at the end of the week? It sounded like

the situation was urgent. Was I wrong?"

Of course she wanted a professional to look at Malachi. Attributing her distrust to the dream's warning, she pasted on a smile. "I'm sorry. I didn't sleep well last night. Come on, I'll introduce you around."

It was noon before Hannah admitted she had deliberately kept Jensen from Malachi's enclosure. She could not shake her distrust of the man. She had finally run out of things to show him other than the cat compound when Dr. Ferris entered the break room.

"Dr. Jensen! I'm glad I caught you." Grant grabbed the other vet's hand and shook it enthusiastically. "The work you did on Malachi last night seems to have done the trick. He's up and about today with barely a limp. I've never seen such a drastic change in an animal." With Jensen's confused expression, the older man stopped his enthusiastic rant. "Did I say something wrong?"

"I did nothing except look at the panther."

"Then who did?"

"Perhaps Ranger Hall has an idea of what happened. She visited the cat with me late last night."

"Hannah?"

What could she say? If she explained that Malachi had asked for her help or that she had worked on the cat while breaking every safety procedure, she would lose her job. There would be no way around it. "Malachi didn't seem any different when I left him." *Not a lie exactly.*

Jensen scowled. "I highly doubt someone came in and randomly treated one of the animals. There has to be more to it than that."

Hannah shrugged with a grin. "Maybe a ghost did it."

Grant chuckled. "Somehow I doubt that, Hannah. More likely a werewolf."

Jake Nester, the tall slender young man who cleaned the small animal cages, laughed as he passed them on the way to the pop cooler. "Maybe it was Big Foot."

More people began to filter in for lunch. As they heard the story, each

offered another theory from werelions to space aliens. During the discussion, Hannah slipped out the back door and ran toward Malachi's pen. She entered the compound as the cat charged the cage, teeth bared. His displeased roar echoed off the brick enclosure. Startled, Hannah screamed and jumped away, colliding with a solid chest. Strong arms circled her waist from behind.

"We've got to quit meeting like this. People will talk."

She twisted away from Jensen's embrace with a glare. "Don't touch me."

He laughed. "I'm not the one who started it. You threw yourself at me."

"Just get away from me." Suddenly, it came to her where she had seen him. Apart from his dark eyes, he looked exactly like her dream lover. She had fantasized about him before she met him. The idea sent goose bumps shimmying up her arms. He could not be the man from her dream. Her lover could not be this repulsive, arrogant creep who made her skin crawl in the light of day.

He stepped closer to trail a fingertip down her cheek.

Hannah pushed him back as disgust shuddered through her.

Anger curled his cruel smile. "Why shove me away? We fit so well together. We should try it sometime when you're not screaming. Of course that isn't always a bad thing. You could scream your pleasure for me anytime, Ranger Hall."

Malachi threw himself against the steel bars and Hannah jumped. His fierce growl exposed deadly fangs. Adrenaline surged through her and her heart skipped despite her confidence the cat wouldn't harm her. "You need to stop touching me. Malachi doesn't share well."

Jensen edged closer, his black eyes no more than slits. "I don't care what some cat in a cage does."

"I do. You're upsetting him, so go."

"You've got to be kidding. You're going to let a dumb animal control you?"

"No. That's why I asked *you* to leave."

"Funny." Jensen glared at the cat. "That animal needs to be put down

rather than released. He's obviously a man-hater. No one can change that." Pointing at Malachi, he smiled. "You've signed your death warrant, pussycat."

As soon as Jensen left, Malachi settled down. He had opened his wound and blood soaked the bandage.

"Oh, Malachi, what have you done?" Hannah didn't dare get close to him in his agitated state. Instead, she dropped to her knees on the safety line. "I don't think Grant will believe Jensen, but he might. How could you be so foolish?"

Malachi snarled, obviously angry that she didn't understand the reason behind his rage.

Hannah sat with the cat, waiting to hear his death knell. Malachi eventually settled down. He lay pressed to the bars, his huge head on his paws. His steady green gaze never left her. Slowly, she slid closer. If Grant came she would be fired, yet she could not allow people to think Malachi dangerous. When she reached the cage, she laid her hand on the panther's enormous head and stroked his ears until he purred.

"I love you, too, beautiful boy."

"Hannah, move away from the bars."

Grant's urgent whisper brought Malachi to his feet with a low warning snarl. Hannah rose and turned toward her boss but did not leave the cage. Half the staff, including Jensen, stood behind him. "Malachi won't hurt me."

Harry stepped forward, his usually animated features a mask of calm. "You don't know that Hannah. If he feels threatened, you can't predict how he'll act. Please come here."

Malachi paced the small cage, his movements more agitated the closer Jensen came to his enclosure. Hannah dropped a hand behind her to stroke his back each time he passed. "I know the rules, Harry, but Malachi isn't violent. For some reason he hates Dr. Jensen. Since I'm not too fond of the man myself right now, I can't blame the cat."

Jensen stepped forward, deliberately agitating the panther. "How do you

explain that no one could get near enough to tend his wound?"

"No one tried without a sedative. Malachi apparently had no problem accepting help. He didn't want to be out of control."

"Did he tell you that?" Jensen laughed. "What else did he say? We'd all like to hear."

She pressed her fingers deeper into Malachi's fur, seeking calm in his solid strength. The big cat licked her knuckles with a soothing kiss. "He claims you're a pompous asshole. I think you're just an arrogant man with a little dick."

Grant stepped forward. "Enough, Hannah. Dr. Jensen is a respected professional in his field. He knows more about cats than the rest of us together. Harry would never have contacted him otherwise. As much as we dislike the idea, we need to listen to him. Now, please come here."

He extended a hand to Hannah. She ignored it. Fortunately, Malachi did as well.

"Wait a minute, Grant." Harry flipped through his notebook searching for something. "Here it is. Dr. Frank VanBeek. I didn't call Jensen."

When everyone turned to him, Jensen smiled glibly. "VanBeek asked me to come. He said Harry sounded worried." As he spoke, he edged closer to the safety line directly in front of Hannah. Before she realized his intent, he grabbed her arm and jerked her to his chest pulling her across the yellow band of paint. He kept his back to Harry and Grant, his large frame formed a solid wall between her and the others when he leaned close to whisper in her ear, "Your pussycat's going to love this."

He turned her so she could see Malachi's reaction and bent his head as if to calm her.

She kicked and twisted to escape but he was too strong. Malachi's roar drowned her frantic cry.

Jensen chuckled, but his grip remained unbreakable. "I can't let you stand so close, Ms. Hall. We don't want to aggravate him further."

The calm words were for the spectators, but his unsettling chuckle did not drift beyond the narrow space between them. His mouth brushed across

her cheek and bile rose to her throat as she stomped down on his instep. He tightened his arm until she struggled to inhale. Every inch of his strong body kept her immobile as he pressed his lips to her ear. "No more fighting, now. I want your cat to see me touch you. One cry and I'll put him down without a second's hesitation."

Her heart nearly stopped at the thought of Malachi's death, and she stilled in Jensen's arms. Tears burned her eyes and her breath hitched in her chest. "You'd never get away with it." She kept her voice soft, not confident his words were an empty threat.

He turned his hand upward and caressed her breast where no one else could see, squeezing hard and quick before dropping his fingers back to her waist.

Malachi went berserk.

Mine! Claimed and carrying! Get away from her!

The solid cage rattled loudly as the large cat slammed repeatedly against the bars.

Her dream lover's voice rang in her ears, but she had no flesh and blood champion to save her. Hannah fought to escape Jensen's hold, but he was too strong. *Fucking prick! Let me go!* She silently screamed at the man holding her captive, but fear for Malachi's life kept her from voicing her anger aloud.

With a snide I-warned-you look, he carried her kicking and twisting to where the others stood.

A scowl marred Harry's usually genial expression. "Was that little display really necessary?"

Grant held out his arms. She jerked away from Jensen's control and slid into Grant's soothing embrace. The older man patted her shoulder and glared. "Did you have a point?"

"Yes. Hannah can't control Malachi no matter how much we would like to think otherwise. An animal that possessive of a human is a danger to you all. The cat needs to be eliminated."

Hannah remained silent as the others debated Malachi's fate. Jensen's

threat echoed in her head. He could follow through when no one else was around. If she told the others what Jensen had really said and done, they would stand behind her, but she could not predict how he would react. Would the psycho kill someone she loved in his crazy bid to destroy the animal?

Malachi snarled low and mean and she stepped away from Grant's comforting touch, unwilling to show affection that might set the cat off again. "Malachi doesn't trust Jensen. That's all."

Harry shook his head sadly. "Darrack's right, Hannah. A protective cat that large is unsafe. I'm afraid we'll have to put him down."

"No!" Tears burned her nose and throat as she fought for control. "Please, don't do this. We don't even know if Jensen's legitimate. Call Dr. VanBeek's office at least."

Harry offered her a sympathetic nod and pulled his cell from his pocket. He stepped away as he dialed the number.

Jensen shook his head. "This is ridiculous. Why are you protecting a dangerous animal?"

"All right, I'll try later." Harry returned with a worried expression on his face and glanced at Malachi.

Grant squeezed Hannah's arm reassuringly but did nothing to antagonize the cat. "What did you find out?"

"VanBeek's secretary said the doctor was out of the office for the day." Harry looked at Jensen and back to Grant before he spoke again. "Perhaps it would be best to wait until we hear from him."

Hannah almost shouted with joy as relief washed over her.

Jensen snorted. "Don't blame me if someone gets killed between now and then."

Grant scowled. "The responsibility for the safety of my employees rests with me. As does the decision to destroy an animal. I take neither duty lightly."

Jensen stormed off in a huff before anyone could say anything more to him.

Hannah threw her arms around Grant and squeezed. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

He hugged her tight then nudged her back so she could see his eyes. “I didn’t do this for you, Hannah.” He eased her from his arms. His grim expression did not bode well as he studied her face. “If it comes down to it, I won’t hesitate to destroy the cat to protect you and the others. Don’t doubt that.”

She nodded but his stern warning could not dampen the happiness bubbling in her chest. Malachi had a reprieve and that was all that mattered. She practically skipped back to her cabin while a hundred scenarios to protect the cat raced through her head.

* * * * *

Jensen waited on her bed. He stood when she entered the room but did not move toward her.

She glared at him as she tossed her keys on the dresser. “What the hell are you doing here? Get out before I call security.”

“I came to apologize. My behavior earlier was inexcusable.” He strolled across the room to stand before her, his eyes intent and sincere. “I’m not sure what got into me. Maybe the cat’s possessive attitude rubbed off.” With a disarming shrug, he smiled. “Since I first saw you, I’ve felt rather protective myself. I can’t blame Malachi for wanting you.” Jensen cupped her cheek in the palm of his hand. “I’d like a shot at proving I’m not the bad guy you think I am, Hannah.”

She jerked back from his caress. What could she say to that? His apology seemed genuine. To reject it would be petty. “Tell Grant you were wrong about Malachi.”

A scowl marred his perfect features. “I can’t do that. The cat’s a beautiful creature, and I understand your desire to take care of him. He apparently wants to protect you, too, but that very instinct is the problem. If we release Malachi, what will keep him from attaching to another female and attacking any male in the vicinity? Even in a large game reserve, handlers need to be

able to care for the animals. If Malachi can't be sedated, and he's too violent to approach otherwise, he'll kill someone." He placed his large hands around her biceps. "Think about it. Do you really want that on your conscious?"

"Of course not." She stepped back from his touch as gently as possible so she didn't insult the man further. Jensen's logic was solid, but that didn't mean she had to follow it. Malachi needed freedom. Once he was away from his present situation, he would be fine. She would not allow him to be destroyed because he cared about her. "When will you do it?"

A fleeting smirk quirked the corner of Jensen's mouth. "VanBeek should get back tomorrow. As soon as he confirms my identity, we'll put the cat out of its misery."

Tonight it is then. Setting the panther free could ruin her chance to get into veterinary medicine, but she could not let him be destroyed without trying to help—consequences be damned.

Chapter Five—Goodbye Malachi

Hannah slipped through her patio door into the still night. *One o'clock. Everyone should be asleep.* Her jeans and dark, long-sleeved T-shirt blended into the shadows, and heavy clouds shut out the harvest moon. Only the animals would hear her thundering heart. Malachi greeted her at the cage door with a low, rumbling growl. “Shh, big guy. No noise.”

She slid the key she'd stolen from Grant's office into the lock and swung the door wide, expecting the cat to bolt. Instead, he rubbed his great head against her legs and nudged her toward the fence. Of course he would be smart enough to realize the cage was only the first step. She knelt and cut the bandage away from his wound. He stood without budging as she examined the open sore. “Good boy. Come on, let's go.”

They stole through the compound on silent feet. Other animals called to them softly like subjects bidding farewell to their king. Thankfully, Ryan was not at the gate. They crept down the path undetected. Malachi paused at the opening to the forest. His eyes searched the trees before he pushed against her leg, once more urging her to lead the way.

Her hands trembled and a sob caught in her throat. “I can't go with you, Malachi. You need to run.”

He remained in place. His emerald eyes bore into hers in wordless demand.

Hannah dropped to her knees and buried her face against his broad foreleg. His heart beat steady beneath her palm, but his heat offered small comfort to their bleak parting. “I love you, Malachi. Please go before it's too late.”

When he finally turned from her, she almost called him back. Images of him shot down by unfeeling hunters flashed—Malachi bleeding—alone and helpless in the savage human world. To release the cat meant he had to fend for himself before he'd fully recovered, but to keep him near meant certain death. A kinder end than slow starvation, perhaps, but no less final. She

lifted her hand and tried to smile as he paused before disappearing into the trees beyond the security lights.

Her chest ached. She did not want to lose him. Casting a furtive look over her shoulder to ensure no one tailed them, Hannah followed Malachi into the cool shadows. He needed to escape Jensen's sadistic plan. She merely wanted to ensure the panther moved away from the human population. A black cat in the area would draw unwanted attention. The forest quickly shut out the human comfort from the compound and darkness swaddled her like a suffocating shroud. She could not see nor hear Malachi. Creeping farther into the forest, she searched for any sign of him. A small clearing allowed moonlight to filter to the ground but did nothing to indicate the cat's path.

A low growl disrupted the silence though she could not detect the source or direction.

"Malachi? It's okay. Go on. Go toward the hills, big guy."

When a hulking form dropped from the branch above her head, she tried to leap aside. Too late. A twisting, clawing weight bore her to the ground. Hot, death-scented breath seared her cheeks and white fangs flashed in the meager light. A cry of alarm tore from her throat. Huge paws held her shoulders to the rocky path. Sharp canines gleamed viciously despite the heavy branches which shadowed the clearing. The black cat's obsidian eyes narrowed to tiny slits. The animal wasn't Malachi. Panic edged into her mind pushing aside rational thought.

Time to die, Kya.

Her screams bounced off the trees as the predator lowered his head for the kill.

Mine!

The simple word rent the terror holding Hannah in its grip. Her attacker released her and disappeared in a savage, snarling mass of black fur and fangs. Malachi and the strange cat rolled across the clearing. Hannah scrambled to her feet, unable to run or even cry out as she fought for clarity.

The animals ripped at one another. Claws and teeth bared. Great

muscles rippling. Without seeing their faces, she could not tell which animal held sway. Ferocious growls and feral shrieks destroyed hope as the two cats wrestled. Finally, when she feared her precious panther would be killed as she stood helplessly by, one cat jumped away and ran into the trees. She knew without doubt Malachi had won. He would not have left her to die.

As reality soaked in, she sank to her knees and rested her head in her hands. Ragged gasps wrenched her chest and relief slammed against her breast bone. Malachi had saved her. Tears ran down her cheeks and soaked her thin cotton T-shirt. He had risked his life to protect her. She lifted her head to find her champion.

His sides heaved from exertion, and he limped more than usual as he moved closer.

Go home, Hannah.

She ignored the voice in her head and threw her arms around the four-legged hero. He smelled of sweat and blood, but she had never been so comforted, so glad to be alive. Tears trickled down her cheeks and into his thick fur. "I can't leave you alone. What if he comes back?"

Go!

She studied Malachi's angular features. Had he spoken? Could she really hear him? A laugh escaped at the ludicrous thought. More likely shock was setting in. "Now, I really am losing it."

The panther growled and nudged her toward the path.

"Stop that. I'll go once you're safely on your way."

The cat snorted and pushed again. *Stubborn female!*

She glared at him trying to focus beyond the reprimand echoing in her head. "Please, get out of here, Malachi. I love you too much to watch you die."

The big cat's muscles twitched, then he left without further acknowledgment.

Hannah followed for a couple miles, assuring herself he moved away from the town and the compound, before she turned back.

* * * * *

Doubt and fear warred in Hannah's skull as she navigated the narrow path to her cabin. Had she been wrong to set the injured panther free? Could he defend himself if the other cat attacked again? Was he strong enough to catch prey? What if Grant had intended to offer a pardon?

She tripped as she stepped onto her deck in the darkness. Catching herself on a chair, she found her balance and spun. *Jensen*. "Get the hell off my porch."

He reclined on her wicker love seat like he owned it. His dark eyes glowed flint hard, but the rest of him hovered in shadow. "The cat's gone and here you are sneaking around in the night. Where have you been, Hannah?"

Dread tightened her stomach, but she ignored it and strolled toward the door as if he didn't scare the ever-loving shit out of her. "I went for a walk. Is that a crime now?"

Jensen rose to block her path. A bloody scratch ran down the left side of his face near his hairline and he looked pale. Had he hurt himself trying to get to Malachi? "It's criminal if you set a dangerous animal loose on the unsuspecting public."

His earthy scent filled the meager inches between them. Memories of another just as broad and strong flooded her—the long, sleek, black hair, the chiseled features. Everything but Jensen's cold stare resembled her dream lover. The breadth of his chest and the strength of his fingers as they closed on her arm seemed unmistakably and seductively familiar. She jerked from his grip and stepped around him to unlock her door. "Drop dead, Jensen. I did nothing wrong and you can't prove otherwise."

He followed her inside, uninvited. "Shall we test that theory?"

Hannah dropped her keys on her dresser and turned to stare down the man she thought of as "the asshole". "How'd you get hurt? A run-in with a wildcat? If Malachi's gone, perhaps you set him free so you could accuse me."

He snorted in his arrogance. "No one will believe that."

She smiled and warmed to the idea of blaming Jensen for the panther's escape. "Let's find out, shall we? I'll tell everyone how much putting the cat down upset you. How in a fit of remorse you must have unlocked the gate. You'll sound like a friggin' bleeding heart by the time I finish. If it comes down to it, we can tie this up in court indefinitely, but no matter what, Malachi will still be gone."

A shadow of madness flitted across Jensen's features. "No, he won't. I'm tired of playing games."

Hannah moved closer to her nightstand, anxious for the security of her loaded pistol hidden in the drawer.

He crossed the room in seconds stopping at the end of the bed. "I wouldn't try anything if I were you, Hannah." He prowled closer with the grace of a cat. "Why do you push me away? Don't you know me?"

"No." She did, but she didn't. His body and his face came from her dreams, but his eyes and attitude did not.

"Liar." Jensen slid the very tips of his fingers across her lips in a gentle caress, and her stomach lurched in response. "You want me, Hannah. You belong with me. Why won't you admit it?"

She edged away. Her knuckles brushed against the drawer behind her; just a few more inches until she had the compact pistol in her hand. She saw him move too late to dodge, no time to arm herself.

She screamed as he pounced and tossed her on the bed, pinning her beneath him. "Time's up. No more running."

His breath smelled of old meat, and nausea rose in her throat. Panic swelled. "Get off of me!" She twisted beneath him. Her fists slammed against his solid back, but her efforts only enraged him further.

He snarled as he caught her wrists in his hands. Spitte sprayed from his mouth and he hissed in unjustified rage. "You spread yourself for that worthless cat, didn't you? You let him pump his inferior seed inside you, let him fuck what should have been mine."

Insanity curled his lip and distorted his mind. How could he think she would lie with an animal? "You're sick, Jensen."

“Am I? Shall we see how sick I can be?” He shoved his hips against hers, forcing her knees apart with his own. “You’ll beg me for more before I let you up from this bed. By the time I finish, you won’t remember his name.”

“Fuck yourself and die.”

His cruel mouth clamped over hers, and his tongue forced hers to submit, raping her orally as surely as he intended to rape her otherwise. Hannah bit down and a metallic taste spilled into her mouth. He jerked away and backhanded her across the cheek. “Accept me, bitch.”

Her skull throbbed as blood from her split lip mingled with his. He dug his fingers into her jaw and held her steady as he plundered her mouth again. Tears welled and trickled down the sides of her face, while she continued to buck and struggle for escape. Malachi was gone. No one would help her. No one would come. She screamed anyway, praying someone would hear, knowing she was truly alone again.

Chapter Six—Protecting Kya

Ja waited until Kya turned around before he circled back to the compound. She had pleaded with him to run, but he couldn't. Not with the enemy in the area. Savage pain clawed his shoulder like a son-of-a-bitch leaving him without options. He could neither escape nor stand and fight with any real hope of success. The battle with Dar earlier had nearly done him in. Kya would be better off where Grant and Harry could keep an eye on her. He would merely ensure they did so.

He crouched in the bushes as Kya stepped into the small circle of light on her patio. Dar rose in his human form and followed her inside. Rage swelled as the bastard closed the door behind them. On silent pads, Ja ran through the darkness to Grant's cabin. The old one would understand and help. Rumors of who and what the place really protected were too wide spread to be false.

Hidden by the shadows behind Grant's cabin, Ja willed his human form forward. The change hurt more than usual. It tore at his wounded shoulder and drove him to his knees as searing fire shot through his limbs. He struggled to stand. He had to face Grant as a man just in case he was wrong about the doctor's true self. The night air soothed his overheated skin when he found his feet. He stole a pair of khaki shorts from the clothesline behind the living quarters and jerked them over his naked hips.

At Ja's knock, the vet opened the door and motioned him inside. "I wondered how long it would be before you came to me."

Ja entered the other man's home with a respectful nod to Hannah's boss. The distinct musk of wolf hovered in the air and calmed Ja's fears. Although the scent did not carry the acid aroma of a disease-driven *were*, the stories of werewolves and such were obviously not wholly unfounded. Whispers claimed the sanctuary sheltered all shifters as equals. With luck, that would prove true as well. "I couldn't leave Hannah behind."

Grant gestured toward the living area and crouched on the arm of a chair

when Ja refused to sit. "Who is she? I've tried to find out since she came to us, but no one seemed to know of a lost girl cat."

"Canar's daughter."

Confusion flitted over Grant's face. "Canar? He lost his position nearly twenty years ago."

"Twenty-two, actually. Her father asked me to protect her before he died. Rumor of this place provided my last hope."

"How'd she wind up without a mentor?"

Ja moved to the window and stared toward the staff quarters, singling out Kya's cabin. "Kya—Hannah—was born in human form. She was only three when insurgents killed her parents. My folks couldn't shelter her, so I took her to a nearby church. Eventually, her foster parents adopted her. Unfortunately, they moved around a good deal. I lost her until a couple weeks ago. Dar's found her now as well."

"Jensen?"

Ja nodded struggling to concentrate on the conversation while worry clouded his thoughts. *Why was Dar still in Kya's home? Why didn't she kick the son of a bitch out?* "His father led the coup against Canar. I'd hoped impregnating Kya would change things. I assumed even Dar wouldn't harm a female in a sacred state, but he refuses to back off. He'll try to seduce her and kill my cub at birth. I can't let that happen."

"Of course you can't." Ferris rose and moved to stand beside Ja at the window. "Where's Dar now?"

"With her."

"Then why the hell are you here?"

Concern in the old one's voice clawed at Ja's gut. "Dar won't hurt her where he could get caught."

"Do you know that for certain?"

"No." Admitting the danger aloud made the situation seem more perilous than before. He couldn't wait for help. "Fuck! I have to go."

Grant caught his arm. "Wait. Let me handle this, Ja. You're hurt."

"You don't stand a chance against him, old one."

“No, but this will.” Ferris opened a closet and took out a bear rifle. The thick barrel gleamed.

“I’m going with you.”

“Fine, just stay out of the line of fire.”

* * * * *

Hannah beat against Darrack’s shoulders. She couldn’t breathe. She would smother with the asshole on top of her or worse.

Jensen lifted his head with a snarl. He squeezed her jaw tighter, refusing to let her look away. “Everyone thinks you’re so fucking special, but you spread your legs for Ja like an alley cat in heat. You should have been mine. Instead, you flipped for that lowlife.”

Hannah jerked from his hold and shoved. When he overbalanced and fell to the side, she scrambled off the bed and backed toward the corner away from him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He rolled to his feet with an insane growl. “Of course you don’t. You’re a stupid female raised by stupid people. You have no right to my position.”

He stood less than a yard from her. His cold eyes darted back and forth as his broad chest rose and fell in agitation. Sweat trickled in a fine line between her breasts, and her hand shook as she held it out to stop him. “Don’t come any closer, Jensen.”

Moisture beaded on his lip as he sneered. “You won’t stop me, Kya.”

“But I will.” Grant slipped into the room with a huge rifle in his hands. “Back off and get out. Go and I won’t lock you up like the wild animal you are.”

“Aw, the wolf pretends he can protect you on his own. Isn’t that sweet?” Jensen smiled but did not move away from Hannah. “Where’s Ja? You didn’t come alone, old man. The cur is here somewhere unless he’s shown his true colors and turned tail. Is that it? Did he leave you to protect Kya by yourself?”

Hannah watched the two men carefully as she slid along the wall in an attempt to escape. Jensen had lost his mind. Ja and Kya sounded familiar,

but she didn't know them or what any of this had to do with her.

Hannah, get out!

The strident command drifted to her. Before she could react, Jensen's hand lashed out and caught her arm. Steel fingers cut into her bicep as he jerked her in front of him. "Told you he was here. Come out, Ja. Fight!"

A low growl echoed through the room as Malachi's long body slid through the patio doors. Dirt matted his sleek fur, his limp severely pronounced.

Release her, Dar. She carries.

"I know. I can smell your stink on her."

She had to be dreaming. What else could explain the strange conversation? How could Jensen hear the voice in her head? If it were an illusion, then Jensen couldn't really hurt her. He wouldn't be able to harm Malachi or Grant either. A simple nightmare meant she controlled her destiny, but her arm hurt where Jensen's fingers held her. Maybe it was real. She clenched her hand against his leg and blocked out the damage he would do to her if she pushed him too far. She needed to end this before someone she cared about got killed. The wild riot of thoughts coursing through her mind made no more sense than the situation itself.

Jensen's focus remained on Malachi and away from her. She didn't give herself time to think. She twisted and slammed her fist between his legs. His roar of rage destroyed the last hope that it was all a nightmare as he shoved her to the side. Grant's rifle boomed in an earsplitting retort the moment before her head met the edge of the dresser. With a loud crack the room went dark.

* * * * *

Once again in second form, Ja sat beside Kya. Her chest rose and fell with a steady, reassuring rhythm. He held an ice pack to the bandaged side of her skull where Grant had stitched the split flesh. Her lashes formed dark crescents against her too-pale skin, and fingerprint bruises darkened along her jaw. Her quick thinking had neutralized Dar long enough for Grant to

get off a shot. Unfortunately, it hadn't been fatal. Dar had escaped while Ja tended to Kya. She had put herself in danger, something she had no right to do—not with his child inside her.

Grant stepped close and placed a hand on Ja's shoulder. "She'll be fine. Let her rest."

"I won't leave her."

"What about Dar?"

Ja growled. *The son-of-a-bitch had touched her.* "If he's not dead from blood loss, he'll pay with his life as soon as I'm certain Kya will be all right."

"I thought your kind considered pregnant females sacred."

"They are. I assumed Dar wouldn't intentionally hurt her. Doing so jeopardizes any chance he has to replace his father without a war, but that wouldn't have mattered if he'd made her miscarry without witnesses." He could have lost her and their baby.

"I'll make sure she isn't alone."

Raw anger burned in Ja's throat as he brushed a kiss over her cheekbone. He wouldn't leave her in someone else's protection again. Not for long. He had spent too many years away from her. "Kya and our baby are my responsibility."

Grant studied the monitor beside her bed. His big hand shook as he fisted it on top the machine and faced Ja. "Ours too. Once I inform the others who Jensen is, no one will let him within a mile of the girl."

Ja nodded. The sanctuary staff would keep her safe while he dealt with Dar. Then he would take her home where she belonged. "Thanks, old one."

Grant cleared his throat. "Dr. Ferris or Grant, even Ferris will do. Old one makes me feel ancient."

"Kya looks up to you. It's a term of respect."

"I know, but I'd rather you called me something else." He chuckled self-consciously and smoothed the sheet that covered Kya's slender form. "I aged ten years when I saw Hannah with that bastard. I don't need to feel any older."

"I hear you."

Grant brushed her hair from her forehead as he tested for fever. "She's safe now. Go get some sleep, Ja."

"Not while she's like this."

"Stretch out beside her and rest, then. You'll be no good to anyone if you run down. I'll post a couple guys outside in case Dar comes back."

Ja hesitated. A giant bruise purpled Kya's cheek making the rest of her face even paler than usual. He wanted his little spitfire back, the girl who had met his passion head on and risked her life to save a wounded animal. "Will I hurt her?"

"Your presence might do her good. It's unlikely she'll wake, but she'll know you're there." Grant squeezed Ja's shoulder with a chuckle. "Take care of your female. She's the closest thing to a daughter I've got."

Once Grant left, Ja carefully shifted Kya on the narrow cot and lay down beside her. She snuggled her head on his shoulder. He could smell her blood and Dar's sweat, but her natural scent floated beneath the other odors. He wrapped his arms around her and held her. His body ached everywhere. His heart hurt more. Dar could have killed her, could have destroyed everything that mattered in a single instant.

Kya whimpered softly in her sleep. "Malachi."

"Shh, little one, I'm here. He won't hurt you anymore." The foreign-sounding name on her lips rankled, but it pleased him that Kya wanted him near even in her unconscious state. He tightened his embrace and pulled her closer as he pressed the ice pack to her wound. "Sleep now, love. I won't let anyone hurt you again."

Chapter Seven—Deadly Combat

The sharp autumn wind bit Ja's face and neck as he slipped from the animal clinic. His wounded shoulder still throbbed, but he felt better prepared to face Dar. Sleeping beside Kya had lifted the exhaustion and renewed his determination to protect her.

Two wolf-shifters stood on either side of the front entrance, and he could smell two more close by. He shook his head with a smile. Of course his Kya would choose to hang with an entire pack of freaking dogs. The guards had not crossed completely to first form. Rather, they hovered between states where the best of man and beast worked together. Rifles rested in the crook of their arms and savage canines gleamed in the dim glow of the outdoor lantern. "All quiet, boys?"

The taller of the two stepped forward. "Don't worry. Hannah's safe with us."

"Make sure of it."

The other shifted his rifle with a glare. His blue eyes sparked with anger, and his deep voice was more growl than speech. "Hannah's cat but she's our sister all the same. That feline cur won't get close to her again."

Ja acknowledged the boy's pledge with a curt nod. Kya would be secure in their hands while he handled Dar. He moved quickly through the compound until he neared Hannah's quarters. Blood and anger hung heavy in the air. He scented the wind seeking direction.

"Are you going after him?"

Ja turned. Grant waited for an answer with three mountain lions and a small wolf pack behind him.

"I didn't hear you come."

Grant shrugged. "You're a little distracted right now."

Rage boiled white-hot and debilitating. He drew in the cool night air and sought control. "If I find him, I'll kill him."

"That's not a good idea, Ja. Do this right. Take it to the clan."

"I can't. Dar's father rules." He had no choice. Royal blood or not, Dar had touched Ja's mate and would die for the violation.

With a brief squeeze to Ja's shoulder, Grant pulled him back to the moment. "Rork won't rule for much longer. Not once you tell Hannah who she is."

"I can't risk it, and I won't spend my time wondering where Dar is or when he'll attack Kya, again."

"Can't blame you, but at least take us with you. He won't come back through those gates unless he wants to die."

Ja shook his head. Too many things could go wrong with untrained soldiers. He couldn't risk letting Dar escape for good. "I fight alone."

"Not anymore." Grant gestured to the wild animals milling behind him. "We protect Hannah with our lives."

Mine. Possessiveness seared through him. He did not intend to share her with the motley crew sheltered under Grant's name no matter how long they had stood by her. He snarled at the group behind the old wolf. "Her name's Kya and she's mine to protect. I'm her clan."

"So are we. Blood bonds don't matter. Hannah's instinct brought her here to the sanctuary. That makes her our concern whether you want us or not."

Ja snarled at the smaller man. "You're not going to drop this, are you, old one?"

"Nope." Grant's eyes sparkled with indulgent humor. "Ready then?"

With a growl, Ja dropped to his knees and allowed his true form to drive off human restraint. He'd let the others trail behind. Dar would die. Witnesses or no. When his limbs settled into place, he studied the greying wolf beside him. The aging vet looked like he could hold his own despite his years. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing to have the extra hunters along. Ja caught Dar's scent and loped toward the woods, toward the one being who could destroy everything that mattered. Kya's adopted family ran behind in an unlikely gathering of felines and canids. None were of the clan, but all belonged to her personal tribe.

Dar's scent intensified as Ja entered the forest. A red stain soaked the dirt where he had rested before moving toward the hills. Ja's anger grew stronger, and a growl tore from his throat at the sight of the blood pool.

Grant caught up and sniffed the ground. *He's not far.*

Lifting his head to the breeze, Ja tasted the air again, searching for the bitter copper of the wounded cat. *He better not fucking die before I get to him.*

I thought you wanted him gone.

At my hand.

Grant stepped in front of Ja, his faded blue eyes stern. *Blind rage destroys reason. Slow down, boy. Face this logically.*

Get out of my way, old one. He shouldered the graying wolf aside with ease as he found the scent trail. *I hold no claim to human reason. The cat in me wants to rip his throat out and leave him for the wolves.*

Grant found his balance and jumped in the path once more. *As happy as we'd be to clean up after you, once Rork discovers his son's dead, he'll have no reason to hold back. Killing Hannah will become his main goal.*

Then he won't know.

Ja—

Enough! Stand aside or fight for the right to stop me, Grant. Ja took off again—caution be damned. Blood lust thundered in his brain as the need to keep Kya safe overrode all else. He would find Dar, destroy the enemy, and protect his love. Then he'd worry about what came next. One word pounded in rhythm with his paws against the solid earth. *Kill, kill, kill...*

Caught up in his thoughts, Ja almost missed the place where Dar's trail faded to a shimmer in the breeze. He stopped and circled back. A small creek ran along the path, and the tracks disappeared into the water. Ja leaped across the stream and landed on the other side. Nose to the wind, he tracked the faint waterlogged scent.

A branch cracked overhead. Then, a driving weight slammed him to the ground. The blow knocked his breath away. Savage jaws sank into his wounded shoulder and claws tore at his chest. With a growl, Ja flipped to

his side and shoved his opponent away. Dar regained his feet and leaped again. Ja braced and rolled with the impact, ripping and biting into the other cat's neck. He could not lose this fight; would not leave his Kya unprotected.

Growling with insane rage, Dar broke free then crouched to attack again. *Does the cunt still live or did you follow me for revenge?*

Ja fought to maintain a semblance of cool though anger surged in his head. He snarled at his opponent. *She lives, but I came to kill you anyway.*

Dar lashed out. Claws barely missed Ja's eye but still slashed deep. Ja spun away stumbling before he shook off the pain with a roar.

Hot-headed and reckless, Dar lunged again. *She's nothing, and you're less.* He missed and skidded before spinning back with a snarl. *Fucking worthless housecat.*

The childish insult released some of Ja's anger and allowed him to find a cold hatred as he pounced and brought the other cat to the ground. He pressed Dar's head to the dirt with a paw, claws sunk deep. *Who's worthless now?*

Dar bucked Ja aside and staggered to his feet and circled. *You think she'll welcome your inferior hide once she realizes she's of the blood? That she's born of kings? What will you do when she casts you and your lowborn brat out and flips for me or my father? Will you stay to meekly serve her or will you run while she squats to accept a more royal cock?*

Blood surged through his head and pounded behind his eyes at the thought of Kya lying with another. She would fight such a situation, but she might not have a choice. Royal blood or not, Canar had given her to him. His to love and protect, and he'd destroy anyone who claimed otherwise. *Kya's mine. You'll never touch her.* Struggling to stay in control while Dar's taunts fired his rage, he leaped, claws bared to slit the other cat's throat.

Dar laughed as he dodged the attack, and Ja skidded toward a tree. *Not for long. You're lowborn. Once Kya understands, she'll have no choice but order your execution for touching her. Unless I've already taken care of the problem.*

Ja could not see or think clearly. The clan would side with Rork and Dar. Divine right would overshadow the word of a dead king. Kya would have no choice in the matter—nor would he. Images of Kya in true form as she rolled in the sun and exposed her vulnerable belly to Dar or crouched to welcome Rork's seed burned away all caution. The cool of logic lost its final tenuous grip as battle heat swept over him with black fury. The desire to rip Dar's jugular shoved away everything else. He could not stop the clan from giving Kya to another, but he could ensure she wasn't sacrificed to the filthy bastard who'd tried to rape her. He leaped again and his teeth found the underside of Dar's throat with a satisfied growl. *Die you fucking bastard! Die!*

* * * * *

Grant and the others watched helplessly as the two cats raged against one another. They struggled, rolling into the stream and out again as they battled. Then they disappeared. Grant leaped forward. He tried desperately to catch Ja but failed. His teeth snapped against the tips of fur and nothing else. The wolf watched helplessly as the stream ran over the edge of a cliff in a narrow waterfall, and the two cats bounced from ledge to ledge in rapid descent toward the ravine at the bottom. Grant waited, paralyzed, as the two felines came to rest on a narrow precipice. Blood smeared the rock face and pooled quickly on the meager outcrop. *Ja! Are you all right?*

One of the black cats stood too far down for Grant to see clearly. Fear for Hannah's friend surged through him in silent alarm.

Ja. Answer me.

The cat looked up and shook the daze from his head before he leaped across to more solid ground and disappeared into the brush.

A howl of pain started among the wolf pack and the felines joined in with frustrated roars. Poignant in its painful impotence, the mournful sound of useless fury echoed through the trees and floated back to the powerless gathering. Hannah's warrior lay dead, leaving her and her clan more vulnerable than ever before.

Chapter Eight—Ja

Jensen had killed Malachi.

Grant had told her so himself. Numbing shock soaked through Hannah's limbs and froze her soul. Fierce pain swelled her chest and burst forth in ragged, tear-filled gasps. She could not draw enough oxygen into her lungs. Images of her beautiful cat broken and bloody against the rocks slashed her heart. She would find and kill Jensen herself. He would not walk away from this unscathed.

A twig snapped. Startled, she turned to see a tall, well built man on the path behind her. Long, dark hair framed his chiseled features. *Jensen!* Grief and rage boiled over in a scream. She launched herself at him. Her fists pounded on his chest while she kicked and clawed. "You killed him! You son of a bitch! I hope you rot in hell!"

"Stop, Kya."

The gentle yet commanding voice heard so many times in her head drained the fight from her. With a gasp, she stepped back. The stranger who held her arms had Jensen's lean build and his coal black hair, but the green unwavering stare was different. She tugged away from his firm grasp. He stood too close, strange despite his familiar aura. "Who are you?"

"You know me."

"No, I don't. I thought you were Jensen, but you're different."

He smelled of earth and sunshine, and the warm, subtle musk of man. She wanted to settle into his arms, to absorb his strength and allow him to ease the pain of Malachi's death. How could that be?

The stranger followed as she retreated. His solid form warmed her through the thin fabric of her T-shirt. Her heartbeat skipped then thundered onward.

"Look at me, Kya. Know me, love."

The man wore no shirt or shoes, only threadbare jeans. A savage red scar ran from his bare chest across his right shoulder and disappeared behind

his back. His hands circled her arms as Jensen's had done, but she felt no revulsion, only bewilderment. He lifted her to her toes, his lips a fraction of an inch from hers. "Who am I?" When she did not answer, he shook her lightly. "Don't rely on what you see. Concentrate on what you know. Set fear aside and tell me who I am."

Then she understood, though the reality should have been impossible. "Malachi."

His smile rewarded her confidence. "Close enough for now." Slowly, he allowed her to slide down his chest until her feet found solid ground once more.

A sick feeling swirled in her stomach. *Impossible*. Wildcats did not morph into human beings no matter how much she wanted Malachi alive. She twisted from his touch and held her hand up to keep him at bay when he reached for her again. "No. This is ridiculous. I don't—can't believe you."

"Yes, you can. You know it's true. You've heard me speak to you time and again. You've looked into my eyes and seen more than my cat."

His rich voice rumbled over her like a caress, and her body instinctively responded to him. To believe him would be to admit insanity. To refuse would do the same. She'd heard his words in her mind too often. Tears welled as she searched for proof of the inconceivable. His eyes shone with the same emerald glint as Malachi's, his hair the same rich black. *He's a man not a cat*.

The stranger chuckled and tugged her against his chest. "I know this seems impossible, but I am the one you call Malachi."

She shook her head and tried to push away, but he nuzzled her neck and licked softly at the love mark that still marred her skin. "You told the panther of a man in your dreams, but you never shared details. You never admitted how you writhed in ecstasy beneath me or how I begged you to accept me."

She groaned as images of her dream lover flooded through her and blended with the warm sexy scent of the man holding her close. "That doesn't mean you're Malachi."

"The night you came to me, the same night Dar—Jensen—arrived, you cleaned my wound and removed the bullet he had put there." His laughter echoed through his chest as he squeezed her tighter. "You asked me not to eat you and worried that not closing the wound would leave too big of a scar." He eased her back and tipped her chin so she had to meet his steady gaze. "We trusted each other then. Trust me now."

"Such things don't exist."

He covered her mouth with his in a long, persuasive kiss and logic gave way to the reality of him. He lifted his head slowly, parting from her in small nibbles. "Feels real to me."

She tenderly traced the furrowed skin on his shoulder, still uncertain. "How? Grant saw you die."

"People believe what their eyes tell them. Thanks to Grant, Rork believes that his son lives, and I'm at the bottom of a ravine." Talented hands wandered over her back, stroking her spine in tiny circles, before he pressed her hips forward against his. "I've been too long without you and too many others have had their paws on your sweet flesh."

"I've touched no one unless you count Jensen."

"You stroke that pack of males you call brothers all the time."

"They're family. You can't be jealous of them."

A low growl rumbled through his chest. "You reek of them when you should smell only of me."

Before she could protest further, his mouth captured hers in a ravenous kiss; breath clean, tongue hot and commanding. A quiver shimmied up her spine as she opened for him. Long fingers threaded through her hair and tugged her head back, increasing access to her mouth. His other arm closed around her waist and shifted her flush against the solid heat of arousal. Desire obliterated confusion as she clung to solid muscles. His strength reaffirmed life—promised it would go on in a heady rush.

Her clothes fell easy victim to his calloused fingers, the last uncertainty melting beneath his touch. He had come to her before; not in a dream, but in this human form. How she could have thought him imaginary seemed as

outlandish to her as believing in shapeshifters would have moments before.

She could no longer think at all, only feel. The breeze tickled her naked flesh. Her nipples puckered as moist air teased heated skin. His mouth closed over her breast, drawing deeply, forceful and insistent, as he shoved his denim clad thigh between her legs. She rode him, massaging her sensitized clit against the rough fabric of his jeans. Desire coiled through her, curling from the tender nipple, abraded by his tongue, through her grateful heart and into her core. A desperate cry escaped her lips. She needed him, needed proof he lived, that he did not lie at the bottom of a ravine for nature to devour. She fumbled at his snap, jerking it loose. "Damn it, Malachi. Hurry!"

He growled low in his throat and shoved her back against the rough bark of a tree. When he freed himself, she had no time to admire his thick-veined shaft before he wrapped her legs around his waist and slammed inside her. She came instantly. She pressed her moans to his shoulder to muffle them as the world narrowed to a tiny circle, and her inner muscles begged him to join her in ecstasy.

* * * * *

The forest slowly returned to normal. She clung to Malachi's shoulders, trembling from the power of her orgasm. His mouth covered hers while he leisurely withdrew and sank back, coaxing her to arousal again. She closed her eyes and absorbed the feel of his thick cock as he stretched her.

His lips left hers to wander down her neck. His tongue caressed the hollow of her collarbone, touching briefly against the tiny scars at the base of her throat. "Mine. Mine to love and protect, Kya."

The strange name caught her off guard, though he and Jensen had called her it before. "My name is Hannah."

"No." He tipped his head so she could meet his eyes. "You're Kya, daughter of Canar, my mate by royal decree."

He sounded as if he didn't really believe his own words. She tried to pull away from his powerful hold. "Malachi, I—"

His fierce scowl almost frightened her. "Ja. No more human labels." He caught her lips, stealing her breath when he plunged his cock deep, rocking her against him with relentless insistence. Pain-laced pleasure radiated through her body as his forceful thrusts struck her cervix. Tearing his mouth from hers, he grasped her chin so she could not look anywhere but his compelling eyes. "Say my name, Kya."

Everything inside her melted around him. She wanted to belong as much as he demanded it.

His touch softened, his next kiss more whispered endearment than true contact. "Please, little one." The arm at her hips tightened; he stroked inside her with increasing adore. Tenderness replaced dominance until she balanced on the precipice once more. "Prove you know me, that the others who circle and sniff at you have no bearing on our lives."

She did not know him in this form but she could not be without him. His touch drove away loneliness, and his voice had reassured her time and again. She needed to give that comfort back to him. With a groan, she captured his face in her palms. "We belong to each other, Ja. No one else matters."

His grunt of satisfaction pulsed beneath her ear. The stars swirled through the tree tops overhead as she tipped her head back in a silent cry. Strong fingers dug into her butt cheeks bruising her, holding her steady for his possession. Ja's cock slammed home in rapid staccato, driving off all thoughts beyond the moment and the feel of him buried inside her.

Hannah moaned. Tension pushed higher. She closed her eyes and absorbed his rough control. Desire and acceptance became one as she met his physical demands with her own. Her nails clawed his shoulders. She pushed forward to meet each plunge. A scream built steadily in her chest.

Ja pounded harder, faster. "Look, Kya. See that you belong to me." She lifted her head as his eyes shifted to watch his rigid cock slam in and out of her. He groaned deep in his throat.

His hot flesh filled her eager body, and her wet folds followed him when he withdrew and closed around his return in a sensuous dance. He shifted

his hand across her thigh and found her clit with his thumb, rubbing in ache generating circles. The trees faded and left only his hands and talented dick.

Ja nipped at the mark on her collarbone. “Fuck me, love. Pull my cum inside until you smell only of me.”

He satisfied her deep-seated need for connection, took and gave in a blood pounding rush, until she could not focus beyond the intense pleasure his touch generated. “Show me you’re alive, Ja. Be mine. Oh...please...don’t leave me, again.”

His hot mouth locked on hers. His tongue mimicked his talented cock. Stinging pinpricks bit at her ass when his nails dug more fully into her tender flesh. Hannah’s world exploded. Her body tensed, clenched and released, shuddered and welcomed the fireworks that shot from his groin to her womb and stole her last thread of control. His kiss captured her impassioned cry and kept their presence secret from the night and those who would destroy them.

Chapter Nine—The Truth Revealed

When they could breathe again, Ja slid to the ground and snuggled her in his lap. Confusion slowly overshadowed Hannah's contentment as reality returned. She traced the solid muscles of his chest, savoring the steady beat of his heart. "I still don't understand. Tell me what I need to know."

He chuckled. "Do you really want to discuss this right now?"

She tipped her head back. "I want to know why you cry another woman's name when you're buried inside me."

A scowl drew his dark eyebrows together. "I've told you. Kya's your given name, the one chosen by the clan."

When he did not elaborate, she pushed him away and slipped from his embrace. She gathered her clothes and dressed—thin armor against the questions thundering through her brain. Who was he? Better yet what was he? She did not bother with underclothing, merely struggled into her jeans and shirt. Her hands shook as she fumbled with the buttons.

Ja pulled on his own pants then gently pushed her fingers aside to close her blouse over her naked breasts. "Don't shut me out, little one." He swept her into his arms and settled on the ground with her across his legs. "Can you listen with an open mind?"

She nodded, and Ja hugged her closer.

"Three summers after your birth, the clan suffered an attack from within. Your father's cousin decided he should rule and eliminated those who stood in his way."

"Stop." She shifted on his thighs so she could see his expression. "You can't start in the middle here. My parents died in a car accident right after I turned sixteen. Are you saying someone killed my dad?"

"Not your adoptive father."

She shook her head. "I was abandoned as a baby. My biological parents didn't want me."

Ja rubbed her back in slow soothing circles. "That's not true. Your

parents loved you. We all did. We just had no way to protect you once Rork overthrew the government.”

“So who were my parents? The man you claim was my father, was he in line somewhere between his cousin and the throne? What made them targets?” She wanted to sink into the comfort he offered but doubts and confusion jumbled her thoughts.

Sadness flitted through his beautiful eyes. “One question at a time, little one.” He took her hand and laced his fingers with hers before he looked at her fully. “Your mom and dad were the king and queen. Your father was the only one who stood between Rork and the throne.”

She laughed not at the humor of the situation, she could see none of that, but because the story kept getting more farfetched. “Does that mean I’m a princess?”

“Yes. You’re the last of the family line beyond Rork. Since Jensen—Dar—is dead, you’re it unless your uncle has another child.”

Disbelief crowded out objectivity. “If my parents were really royalty, where were their guards? Why did no one stop this Rork?”

“He struck too fast. It’s not uncommon. Once the reigning king or queen is dead, the next in line takes the throne. Your grandfather came to power in much the same manner.”

Ja had requested she listen with an open mind, but she didn’t know if she could. It was too much to take in. She had been on her own too many years, had carried the knowledge of abandonment too long. To believe she descended from nobility was even harder to accept. “So were they... Were my parents like you and Jensen?”

“I’m not royal.”

She scowled. “No, I mean, like you. Could they...?” How did one ask such a ludicrous question? The whole cat-shifter thing hovered beyond the realm of comprehension. “Could they turn?”

“Yes. We are all of the Wyenko tribe of the Kialo clan.”

How could she trust him when he made such outrageous claims? “I can’t do what you do. I am nothing more than I appear.”

Raising her hand to his mouth, Ja feathered kisses over her knuckles. "Belief is a hard thing, but you are far more than you seem."

"So why haven't I ever shifted?"

"Because this is first form for you. Shifting requires a conscious effort to move from first to second stage and maintaining it takes practice. You did not have a mentor as you grew into your abilities, so you have never known to try."

"What is your first form?" Was the sleek black cat his natural state?

"I was born feline, as is almost a hundred percent of our kind."

Hannah didn't know what to believe. The sanctuary had been the first place she'd truly felt at home; among the trees and animals she found a lonely sort of peace. Still, his story tested the imagination too far. "How many is that?"

Humor sparkled in his eyes. "In the clan or the tribe or all shifters?"

"The clan—wait... Are there other kinds of shifters?"

He chuckled and dropped a kiss on her head as if she were a naive child. "About a thousand in the clan. Maybe ten thousand Wyenko worldwide. I haven't a clue how many total shifters there are. Too many to count."

The large numbers declared his story false. Relief washed over her in a comforting wave as she realized he was messing with her. "Liar." She smacked him on the chest and laughed. "I can't believe I'm so gullible. You actually had me going. No way could that many shifters roam among us. Someone would notice."

"They do. Where do you think legends of werewolves and vampires shifting to bats come from?" Ja tucked her hair behind her ear with a grin. "Even Bigfoot can be linked back to a Yetan shifter. Myth stems from fact more often than not."

That actually made sense to some extent. More than most of the rest. "Right. Then are there a bunch of people like me running around ignorant of their abilities?"

"Doubtful. Those born in human form usually don't live into adulthood. You are a rare and blessed gift."

She snorted as she tried to rise. “Like a white buffalo.”

Ja laughed and pulled her close. “I’d hardly call you a buffalo. An eagle, maybe.”

She wiggled to get away where she could think, but he swatted her butt gently. “Sit still until we’re done.”

With a huff, she settled against his chest and traced the smooth lines of his muscles careful to avoid the angry red scar on his shoulder. “How did you get into all of this?”

“Your parents died protecting you, but before he gave in to blood loss, your father carried you to my mother’s den and left you with me. He commanded that I care for you and protect you from those who would kill you. I had barely passed my thirteenth year.”

Unexpected sorrow lanced through her chest renewing a nearly forgotten ache. “How could he just leave me like that?”

He stroked her back with tender comfort, kneading the tight muscles at the base of her neck. “He had no choice. Everything was in turmoil. I’m not sure he knew who else to trust. Canar understood that I would give my life to protect his daughter.” Anger flashed in his eyes, but he reined it in and forced a reassuring smile. “The king and his mate lay dead, and the rest of us were forced to submit to Rork. My family refused to reveal your location. Unfortunately, we could not keep you with us. As a member of the old royal guard, my father was imprisoned, and mother had no food for such a tiny girl cub. In this form you could not have survived without the power of your father’s position to protect you. For your sake, I carried you to a church and left you. I kept tabs until your tenth summer.”

The pain in his words tugged at her heart, and she snuggled closer to his solid heat. “My parents—adoptive parents—moved around a lot after that. I lived in six states in the next eight years.”

“Were they good to you?”

“They loved me. Mom used to say that when God found out my birth mother couldn’t take care of me, He left me on the church steps as a special gift for my mom and dad.”

He brushed a fleeting kiss over her forehead. "I feared I'd never find you, or that Dar would get to you first."

Hannah needed to believe more than her doubts could overcome. She shifted to face him. "Tell me about my father, about them. All of it, Malachi."

He growled low in his throat. "I'd prefer my true name from your lips, Kya."

The gentle reminder sent after ripples of pleasure through her, but she forced herself to ignore desire in favor of knowledge. "Tell me about them, please, Ja."

He set her to the side and rose to stare into the forest. "Your father, Canar, ruled wisely. He treated his people with respect. Your mother did the same. Had anyone suspected Rork's treachery, we would have stopped him. With Canar dead, the clan had no choice but to accept his cousin's right to rule. Rork's son, Dar, made it his life's goal to find and destroy you before you could return to usurp his father's position. Dar intended to rule without loose ends."

Anger overpowered grief. Dar had helped kill her parents and had tried to kill both her and Ja. *The buzzards are welcome to him.* Pushing aside the nasty thoughts, she walked to where Ja stood so she could read his face. "So, now that Dar is dead?"

He glanced at her then away. "Nothing. As long as his father remains in power, the clan suffers."

"That doesn't seem right. If Rork seized power, why can't someone else take it from him? Are they all such cowards?"

His shoulders stiffened as if she had insulted him personally. Ja shook his head. "Only those of the blood can rule unless there are no more."

"And I am the last?"

"Yes. Unless Rork breeds another child, but he has failed to do so after more than twenty years in power."

If what he said were correct, she stood on the edge of something greater than she could have imagined. She also felt like he had painted a giant

target on her chest. "If this is all true, what if he and I both die?"

"Then the clan would be vulnerable to takeover."

Ja shifted to stare through the tree limbs. His jaw tensed as he wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close. Power radiated from him. Such strength. Rork was older, weaker. He had to be. His son had been Ja's age. No matter how influential, he would not defeat her Ja. No one could hold out against him. *Not even me.*

Oh God. What if he was no better than the man he called his enemy? He could crush her, rip her throat out and leave her to bleed. Could he seize control with her death? Is that what he really wanted? Panic screeched through her brain like a siren, but she had to know. "If the bloodline ended, would you step up then?"

"I would not leave them without protection for long."

He would take the throne if the bloodline died. She and one old man would not stand much chance. Still she pushed. "Eliminate me and you can rule, but not while I'm alive. So why not kill me? Here, where no one would know the truth."

His snarl paralyzed her momentarily. She had literally asked for death. Strong fingers closed on the back of her skull and pulled her head back. Her throat lay exposed to his whim, but he did not attack. Instead, he forced her to look at him. His sharp eyeteeth gleamed white and dangerous. "You are mine to protect, given to me by the king. I do not take that duty lightly."

Confusion and rage flared through her chest. Suddenly, it didn't matter that he had a chance to kill her but didn't. Only one word registered. "Duty? You're a knight in black-furred armor, and I'm simply your assignment?" She squeezed her eyes closed against the sting of his words. He hadn't been in her life long enough for his opinion to matter, but her chest ached as he crushed her foolish emotions. She cared about, perhaps even loved, the man whose voice soothed her in the night, the one who aroused her body and soul to passions she'd never known before. Being his responsibility wasn't enough, not when she needed so much more. "I don't want obligation, Ja. I free you from any promise my birth father forced on you."

His hand gentled in her hair, but he did not release her. "Look at me, Kya."

She opened her eyes when the silence grew thick. "Just leave me alone. This—you, me, everything—it's too much. I don't want to hear anymore."

"Aw, love. Don't shut me out." He wiped a tear from her cheek and pulled her in for a tender kiss that lifted a bit of the weight from her heart. "Initially, I wanted to protect you for your father and the clan, but when I found you, again, I thanked the stars for Canar's gift." His gentle smile cajoled her to believe. "What I feel began with a duty to keep you safe but has become a selfish desire. When you bravely helped a wounded animal, which was foolish as hell by the way, I knew you would not fail your people. That strength combined with your beauty drew me in long enough to know you. Now nothing exists beyond your hold on me." He tugged her closer and rested his forehead against hers a moment.

She breathed him in like oxygen, memorizing his scent.

"You have become my soul, Kya."

Tears burned as she studied his striking eyes. "Do you mean that?"

His mouth found hers in a kiss far more gentle than those they'd exchanged before. When he pulled away, a half smile tilted the corner of his mouth. "You weaken me. Such a flaw would shame me before others."

She brushed his hair from his face. "Would it be so bad to love me?"

He growled. "Weakness equals suicide, but I'll not leave you. Believe that. If you choose to rule, I'll stand beside you. If you walk away, I'll follow."

"And leave the clan to Rork?"

He shrugged as if he didn't care, but honor and responsibility radiated from his soldier's stance. "There are others who could keep them safe."

"Would they? If a member of the blood exists, would they step up?"

"Maybe not."

She touched the muscle that jumped in his jaw. "You wouldn't abandon your clan to such a fate."

A wicked grin flashed across his full mouth. "I'm hoping you won't

either.”

Kya couldn't help but smile back. “Say I believe you. Not that I am certain I do, but let's assume I did. Could I take control to save your people?”

“They're your people, too. You couldn't do it alone, but the majority will support you when the time is right.”

“Why not now? If the situation is so bad, why leave the others to suffer if you can fix the problem?”

His eyes darkened to near forest green. “I told you. The clan won't support a coup without a royal to replace Rork.”

“I thought that was the point of dragging me into this.”

“You'll soon be in no condition to fight for anything beyond sleep.” When she didn't say anything, but waited for him to continue, Ja scowled. “You carry my son or daughter within you.”

Her hand flew to the mark on her neck. He had come to her bed. Memories of Ja's hard body on hers sent a shiver through her. The incredible stretch as she accommodated his girth. His hot demand in her ear, *Admit you are mine*, as he drove into her virgin pussy again and again. The hot surge of his cum as it pulsed inside her to flood her unprotected womb. She gasped aloud. She had not considered the possibility of pregnancy because she had not believed her night lover was real. How could he know what she did not? “I haven't missed a cycle.”

“You will. You conceived the first time we came together.”

“How could you know that?”

He chuckled. “I could smell your heat, little one. It's unlikely my seed didn't take.”

Her cheeks burned. “It's not nice to tell a lady she stinks.”

“I didn't say that.” He pulled her in for another kiss, more possessive than the last. “The sanctuary had become my last hope. When I topped Granite Point, I knew I'd found you.”

She laughed in disbelief. “That's almost three miles away.”

“The trees masked the air so I couldn't scent you earlier.”

"Are you trying to tell me that people can smell me from further than that? Ewww."

He squeezed her hard and grinned. "Not all people but *your* people. A male can sense a female up to five miles away, farther if she belongs to him."

"Do you at least like the way I smell?"

He buried his nose against her throat and inhaled. "Clean and fresh with a hint of wild clover. Nice."

"And other times?" She didn't really want him to tell her she stank, but if he lied to her, what else would he lie about?

He groaned. His hands found her waist then slid lower to cup her hips and press her against the solid rod growing evident beneath his jeans. "Other times you smell of need, musky and sweet at the same time. I want to sink my tongue inside you and taste your essence. Mount you and take you as you were meant to be taken. Mark you so completely that no one else would dare claim what belongs to me."

She moaned. Images of Ja driving into her pushed away all thoughts beyond him. He slid one broad palm between her thighs and urged her to open for him. He cupped her mound through her thick jeans but she might as well have been naked. Moisture flooded her vagina and soaked the denim as he worked his fingers in long, smooth strokes.

His lips traced the sensitive line from her ear to her shoulder while he destroyed the last of her barriers. "I can smell you right now, Kya. Not like before. It's better because it's my touch that makes you wet, not some primitive need to continue the species. Tell me you want me, little one. Make me believe."

Her heart jumped in her chest, and shivers coiled in her stomach. How could he doubt the effect her had on her? Every cell in her body desired him. "You make me insane, Ja. I can hardly breathe when you're near." She traced her fingers down his solid chest and lower, edging slowly toward his zipper. "I want you." She hesitated then. How could she express the way he made her feel? How could anyone explain her fiery desire to be near him? "I

want you in my life, my arms, my body.”

Ja growled low in his throat. Suddenly, her jeans opened along the seam and two fingers pushed between her swollen labia. The intrusion made her gasp. “How?”

He chuckled as he worked her tender flesh. “Sharp claws, remember?” His thumb pushed the torn material aside and found the quivering nub at the juncture of her thighs.

Lightening curled and snapped in her abdomen.

He groaned and pushed her back a step. “Touching you gets me too hot, too fast. Strip for me, love. Show me your sweet body.”

“Here?”

“Now.”

Somehow, undressing for him seemed terribly intimate. Before when they’d come together, she’d been driven by the need to prove he was alive, but now the urgency had eased. Butterflies teased her stomach as she hesitated.

He rolled her clit between his thumb and forefinger, pulling gently, then more firmly until little ribbons of pleasure danced in her blood. “I ache for you. Please, little one?”

She couldn’t say no when he asked like that. She moved from the seductive caress of his hand and pointed toward the tree he had leaned against earlier. “Sit and give me a second.”

He grinned but did not comment as he settled against the broad trunk.

Unsure of where to start, she bit her bottom lip then straightened her shoulders and faced him. “I’ve never done this before.”

A growl rumbled in his chest. “Good, then I won’t have to kill some poor bastard.”

She hesitated a moment longer before she slowly unbuttoned her shirt and eased it over her shoulders. She kept the edges together, making him wait.

His stare practically set her clothes on fire and primitive power flashed to her core.

With a smile she allowed the top to slide lower. Her nipples peeked above the material and hardened under his steady gaze.

Ja snarled and sat straighter. "Touch your tits for me, Kya. Show me what you like."

His throaty command eased her embarrassment. Slowly, she allowed the shirt to drift to the ground, then trailed her nails across her stomach and upward until she brushed the bottom curve of her breasts.

His hands clenched, and he licked his lips with a wicked grin. His teeth pushed on his lower lip.

She pinched her nipples lightly between her fingers and thumbs, rolling them for Ja's pleasure as well as her own.

His eyes narrowed emphasizing their almond shape. "Now the rest."

She turned her back to him and watched over her shoulder as she released her zipper. The heavy denim material caught on her hips until she pushed her jeans down and stepped from the pant legs. She never took her attention off him. Her ass lifted as she bent forward. "Can you smell me now, Ja? Can you see how wet you make me?"

His feral purr rumbled low, stroking her skin as surely as a caress. "Spread your legs and finger your slick pussy for me, Kya."

Embarrassment returned. His hot gaze burned it away. She opened her thighs and eased her fingers through the small snatch of tawny-colored hair and into her dripping slit. Stroking herself felt wicked and sensual, especially with his focus on her, but she craved his skilled touch. She hesitated. "Are you going to make me do all the work, big guy, or mark your territory like the true king of cats?"

A strange look flitted across his face, and he rose to his feet with a scowl. He jerked his cock free from his jeans. "Suck me first. Prove that I am the one you belong to."

Kya could have said no. He wouldn't demand anything she didn't want, but his sexy voice sent need pulsing between her legs. The desire to taste him, to feel the silky skin of his cock on her tongue, melted her inhibitions. With a soft groan, she straightened and turned toward him. He didn't move.

Lust and something she didn't recognize darkened his eyes nearly forest green. She closed the distance between them and sank to her knees, supplicating herself to him and the raw passion he generated without effort.

Chapter Ten—Royal Reality

Ja watched Kya open her mouth and close her sweet lips around his cock. His breath hitched. Her tongue swirled around him, tasting, testing. His groin tightened, drew up, and ached as she sucked him like a commoner.

She's born of kings.

King of cats she'd called him. Maybe she didn't know she belonged with someone of the blood. Would she walk away as if he never existed the moment the clan demanded it of her or stand beside him? Whether Rork remained in power or not, they would see her mating with a soldier's son as an insult to her lineage. If he took her home like honor commanded, someone suitable would warm her bed. Her parents would have expected no less.

Still, he had claimed her and she had accepted—body and mind—she belonged to him until someone convinced her otherwise. He buried his hands in her long hair and pulled her forward, forcing his dick into the seductive cavern of her mouth. She gagged and shoved him away as she would eventually push him from her life. He might hang for crossing the line, but anger and possessive desire demanded he keep what he had taken. He tightened his hold pumping his cock deeper between her royal lips.

Kya jerked away. Anger flashed in her amber eyes as she slapped his hand aside. "Stop it!"

Rage bashed at his pride. She had admitted she wanted him, had demanded he take her. She had no right to renege on that, no right to leave him for someone better. "I won't let you cast me aside."

She doesn't understand. She had to think he had lost his mind, but pride made fools of loving men. He pulled her to her feet and spun her around so her back was to him, pressing her down with a palm in the center of her spine. She caught herself from falling with both hands on a tree trunk. Her long hair spread across her slender back and called up her proper form.

Raw anguish seared his gut as the silken strands caressed his wrist. Her cat would be exactly that color, burnt sugar and sunshine. His true self longed for her sleek feline, for the elongated lean muscle and beautiful curves of her hips and shoulders. Ja shoved aside the sensual fantasy and replaced it with Dar's words. *"What happens when she flips for me or my father?"*

That wouldn't happen. Dar was dead and Ja would ensure Rork couldn't touch her before he took her anywhere near the clan, but her father had expected him to restore Kya to the throne. He could not deny her and those who would love her that right. Unjust anger and pain tore at his conscience.

She twisted beneath him. Red-hot blood surged through his brain and down to his groin. Kya was not better than him no matter what others thought. If she chose to bow to some royal pansy, let her, but she'd fucking remember Ja's name and how he made her feel. It would be his voice she heard in her head at night, and a warrior's dick that filled her fantasies while a king mounted her.

She struggled but he held her fast. "Ja, why are you doing this?"

"Because..." What could he say? *Because I want you more than I want to breathe, but I have no right to keep you by my side.* He could not make her understand any more than he could change their stations in life. Hers to lead. His to protect.

Kya fought his hands. Pictures of her bending to another's will tore at his heart, but the image of her bloody and battered if she fought hurt more. Whoever the clan chose would have the right to force her to yield. It would be better if she accepted her destiny. He tightened his grip. He would not run with her no matter how much he longed to keep her for himself. Too many others would suffer for his selfishness. Kya continued to jerk but he could not release her. He had to have her once more. He pressed harder on her back as he lifted her with his other arm and aligned her to his cock.

She wrenched her hips to the side and glared at him over her shoulder. "What the hell's wrong with you?"

"Nothing's wrong with me!" *Nothing except I can never have you.* He had known it all along. Her father had chosen Ja to protect her, nothing

else.

Will you stay or run while she squats to accept a more royal cock?

He bent over her and braced his arm beside her face. Right and wrong warred in his head. He held her in the position she would be forced to take for another, head low, ass high. "Submit, Kya. Get used to it."

Tears glittered on her lashes, but she quickly swiped them dry. She was angry, not hurt. Rage tightened her pretty mouth. Her wildcat shone behind her eyes and her fangs emerged, cute and sexy and lethal. His own cat screamed to be free. He licked the tender area between her shoulder and throat and shoved his cock against her tight cunt. Her wetness testified to desire, but her muscles clenched against him, shutting him out. He caught her right wrist and jerked her hand down between her legs. He forced her tear moistened fingers into her folds. "Rub your pussy for me, my queen. Make this easier on us both."

Fury and confusion shone in her amber eyes as she fought his grip. "Stop this, Ja. You'll hate yourself. I'll hate you."

"Should I give a shit?" He blocked the truth of her words. *She'll hate me anyway.* He could not change the blood that coursed through his veins, could not make himself worthy, and could not walk away. She held him out. The cat in his head snarled with rage and would not back down. He would take her, mark now and forever, so when she tossed him carelessly aside it wouldn't hurt so goddamned much. His claws emerged. They dug into the tender flesh of her hip and her wrist.

She hissed in feminine anger.

His better judgment reared to kick him but he could not back down. He had to sever any feeling she might hold for him or she would suffer for it. If she fought fate for his sake, she'd suffer, but that did not ease the fiery pain in his soul at the thought of her willingly accepting another. "A king of cats will make you surrender to his will."

A sob caught in her throat as she looked at him. Confusion swam in her big amber eyes. "Ja, please, stop."

The soft plea for mercy sliced at Ja like slivered glass, but he could not

allow himself to bend. Making her hate him was the only option left. “I can’t.”

Her eyes slanted. Her nails lengthened and sank into the tree bark. An unrestrained snarl curled from her throat as her feline screamed for freedom. “Fine, you want it rough? Show me what makes you so tough, big guy.”

Kya shoved her hips against him, and his cock entered her snug slit with little resistance but still her body would not yield fully. He braced himself against the tree with his left hand while he pressed his fingers on top of her slender ones with his right, rubbing her clitoris roughly as his heart shattered. “Open your tight little cunt. Know it’s me that fucks you, right here and now, not some pansy-assed royal who won’t appreciate how ripe and luscious you are, little one.”

Anger and frustration roiled in his stomach when her muscles quivered around him and stroked his aching dick. *Damn it to hell.* He could not cause her pain no matter how sound the logic. He would explain, make her see why they could never work, but he could not destroy her fragile trust anymore than he could step away. Not yet. His fangs sank into her shoulder and held her in place. Blood touched his tongue, and he sucked at the tiny wounds until her body grew soft and welcomed him completely. When he felt her relax, he shoved his engorged cock to the hilt then reared back, pulling nearly free of her wet slit before he slammed home again, and again, knowing it was the last time he would ever hold her, hating himself and her for that reality.

* * * * *

White-hot desire blazed through her limbs. Kya quivered with untamed passion as he hammered her. Something she said or did had changed him. The battle between gallant knight and savage warrior radiated in his every thrust, as if each touch could be their last. *What was he hiding?* His rage triggered a change in her as well. She felt feral, stronger and sexier than ever before. He demanded she open to him, but she needed no such

command. His rough embrace ignited sexual craving. She longed for the power that rippled in his strong arms. With a savage cry, she whipped her head to the side and sank her teeth into his wrist. Lust shot directly to her pussy. Her body cried for him, needing his strength to feed her own.

He slowed his thrusts, easing in and out of her, gentling his forceful caress against her clitoris with a deep groan.

Drops of his blood clung to the tips of her eyeteeth and tasted metallic on her tongue. She turned her head and growled before meeting his eyes. "Finish what you started, Ja." His dick swelled thicker. Her body stretched to accommodate him with a sensual ache. She ground her hips against his. "Hard."

Pure desire surged behind his green gaze. He pushed her to the ground and sank to one knee.

She leaned on her elbows and knees then lowered her shoulders, submissive and commanding. Breath held in anticipation of his domination.

Bracing himself, he gripped her hips and shoved inward then withdrew to drive home again. He angled his hips. The head of his cock slammed against her G-spot each time he rammed deep, and pure fire roared through her body and brain. His claws punctured her skin. He thrust in and out of her trembling core with brutish control. "Mine. No matter who you spread yourself for. Always mine."

Kya turned her head so she could see his savage gaze. "No one else—ever." She purred with a sultry gasp while he plunged again. Tension rose and held her teetering on the edge of violent bliss. "Oh...fuck me...fill me. Don't stop." She slammed back, meeting his aggression with her own. "Harder, Ja." She clenched and squeezed her inner muscles, stroking him, feeding the need that raged in her head. Her breath came in desperate, unstoppable sobs. "You feel so...oh...oh, yes."

Her muscles contracted around his cock, and she came violently, screaming his name as her body convulsed beneath his. His own release followed hers, hot cum seared her as his arms tightened and his desperate pledge echoed in her ear. "Mine forever. No matter what."

Chapter Eleven—Clarification

Ja continued to hold her long after the tremors of orgasm had passed. His tongue soothed the sting left behind by his fangs. Eventually, she pushed against his arms until he released her. She didn't say anything as she pulled on her shirt then turned to confront him. "Care to explain what the hell that was about?"

He had found his own pants and stood with his back to the tree, eyes down. "I shouldn't have hurt you."

She couldn't bring herself to admit aloud how much she had wanted his aggression. "You didn't, not really. I want to know why you tried."

When he finally faced her, his dark skin turned pale. "Kya, you're bleeding."

"Duh. What did you expect? You bit me."

"Not there." He dropped to his knees in front of her. His thumbs hooked in the bottom of her shirt and lifted it to her waist. Puncture wounds pierced her hips and blood ran in tiny rivulets to the juncture of her thighs and down. With a sigh, he laid his forehead against her stomach and tremors shook his shoulders. "I thought it was the baby." Ja tenderly kissed the area his claws had pierced then licked the wounds. "I didn't want to cause you pain, little one."

He seemed so lost, her great warrior cat humbled by the sight of her blood. She couldn't help touching his dark hair gently. She should stay mad at him. He had used her roughly but once her anger passed, she'd loved it. Her vagina clenched at the thought of his strength slamming into her. She tugged gently on his hair until he lifted his gaze. "Tell me, Ja. That wasn't about sex or lust or even a need to control me." She cupped his adored face in her hands and kissed him with love and unexpected certainty. "What were you trying to do?"

"If I explain, you'll hate me sooner."

He would not meet her eyes and fear nudged at her stomach. "Why

would I hate you?"

Ja rose to his feet and moved to stand at the edge of the clearing. His broad shoulders bore the evidence of his emotions; fear or anger, she could not tell. "I don't think you understand how important you are. You're father and mother both descended from royalty. Dar should have been your mate."

"Says who?" She moved to touch his arm but he shrugged her off. "Ja, listen to me. I never wanted Dar. Why would I?"

"He's of the blood."

"Then you have to be, too. You look like brothers."

"From my mother's side. Dar's mother and mine were litter mates, born and raised in royal standing. My aunt chose to accept her birthright and marry Rork. Mom went slumming when she mated my father."

Screw it if he didn't want to be touched. He needed her. She hugged him tight pressing her cheek to his muscled back. His arms crossed over hers accepting the quiet comfort. "You still carry the blood, right?"

"It's not the same. I'm tainted common."

"So? That doesn't matter to me, Ja."

"It will matter. I let myself forget that for a while. I tried to pretend that Canar had chosen me as your mate, but I knew better even as I claimed you." He stiffened in her embrace before he sighed and turned in her arms. "I shouldn't have crossed that line." He brushed her hair off her face and tipped her chin up for a quick kiss before he stepped away from her. The muscles of his back tightened and jumped. "Impregnating you should have kept Dar at bay for a while, but even that failed. If we're not successful in overthrowing Rork, the clan will expect you to couple with him for the sake of the bloodline."

She had to laugh. "You're kidding, right?" When he shook his head no, she scowled. "That's sick. It's the twenty-first century. American women don't marry to satisfy antiquated prejudices, and they sure as hell don't mate with their relatives."

He turned back toward her then, his gaze steady and intense. "Run with me. I'll take care of you and our child."

Caring rang in his voice, but regret would follow. "If we do that, the clan suffers under Rork's control even longer. You wouldn't do that."

"I'll go back once I know you're safe. I'll recruit a neighboring clan to help. Their blood can rule. It's not what your father intended, but you won't be put in a situation that's makes you uncomfortable." He came closer and rested his hands on her shoulders, his green eyes dark. "Run with me, little one. Forget everyone else for a while."

She shook her head. "I can't make you do that, Ja. The clan means too much to you. I hear it in your voice whenever you speak of them." He started to interrupt but she pressed her fingers over his mouth. "I want to know more about my family, but their rules are not mine. I don't care who your parents were. If the clan doesn't like that, so what? If I can help you free your people from Rork's tyranny then great, but I won't mate with him. If you have a problem with that then make sure he isn't in the way."

He chuckled and pulled her into his arms. "Just that easy, huh?"

"Yep."

The humor left his expressive face and he kissed her hard, lifting her against him with a groan. Fear eroded her confidence as she tasted hesitation on his lips.

She pulled from his embrace. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Even if Rork isn't around, the people will expect you to choose a royal mate. They'll arrange it if you don't"

"You said I was the end of the bloodline."

"Yours, but there are other clans within the tribe who would have nobles looking to marry."

Every time she had things figured out, he threw up another roadblock. She wanted to smack him. "I won't do it. I choose you."

"If you return to the clan, where you belong, you won't be given a choice."

"What about what *I* want?" The weight of everything he'd told her dropped on her shoulders. If she walked away from the clan and Ja followed her, how long before he regretted leaving the world he cared about? If she

tried to help him free his people from the tyranny that had killed her parents, he would refuse to be with her and their baby. *The baby*. She cupped her still flat stomach with her hand and blinked away tears. "And if you're so lowly, what about our child? What happens to him or her?"

"If you return in sacred condition while Rork remains in power, he'll wait until the baby's born and then kill it as a sign of his benevolence for allowing it life, no matter how brief."

She gasped. "Benevolence?"

Ja sighed and looked down. "I'm trying to tell you what to expect. Why it's so important for you to stay out of the picture until after the baby's born. If the clan selects a husband for you, what happens depends on your mate. The baby could be sold to someone who deals in exotic pets or sacrificed to appease the parents of the man chosen for a blemished bride."

He had to be out of his mind. "You're talking about selling or killing a child, *our* child."

"I know. That's why I need you to wait." He reached for her but she dodged his touch. He sighed and stuck his hands in his pockets. "I wouldn't let any of those things happen. After our baby is born, you can return to the clan like your parents would have wanted. Grant will take care of the cub until I come back."

Was he serious? "What about me? I'm supposed to dump my kid off and forget she ever existed just because someone I don't even remember would have wanted me to?"

Ignoring her as she tried to hold him back, he wrapped her in his arms. "It wouldn't be like that, little one. Our baby would never feel less than loved."

She shoved against his chest and twisted away. "Bullshit. I've lived this." Her lungs tightened and she had to breathe deeply before she could continue. "My adoptive parents were wonderful. I adored them as if they had given birth to me." Her voice caught, and she blinked against the burning in her eyes. "But I wondered every day of my life why my birth parents didn't love me enough."

“Canar and Tia treasured you to their last breaths.”

“Then why would they want me to do something so repugnant?”

“Because some things are bigger than the individual.”

“I understand that.” He honestly believed the good of the clan should outweigh his personal desires. They would be halfway across the country if he didn’t think that way, but she didn’t give a crap about strangers. She cared about him and the child growing inside her, even if he regretted making it. “Noble concepts do not change anything. I won’t allow my child to ever wonder why I didn’t care enough.”

He tugged her close; his strong arms lessened her childhood pain but could not wipe it away. “I couldn’t tell the baby who you are, but our child will never doubt your love. I’ll make sure of it, Kya.”

His heart beat steady and solid beneath her cheek. He would try to keep his promise but he had grown up without doubts about the people in his life. “What could you possibly say? ‘Mommy loved you, but everyone else mattered more.’” She stepped away from the comfort he offered. Leaning on him made her feel weak. “Screw that. I won’t cast my child aside, and I won’t marry someone simply because of his genetics.”

“Then quit fighting me. Let’s go.”

“No.” She couldn’t destroy his vision of her anymore than she could leave her child behind. “You would hate yourself for leaving your people and hate me for making you do it. Even if you went back later with a different royal, you would always regret turning my father’s throne over to anyone you didn’t know or trust fully. Find out how to get rid of Rork and at the same time stay with me and our family. There must be a way.”

He grabbed her arm and spun her around to face him. “Damn it, Kya, you’re not listening. You will not be allowed to stay with me.”

“So after you rescue everyone from Rork and put me on the throne, will you walk away and leave me there?”

“No.”

How could the man who claimed she belonged to him be having this conversation with her? “So you’ll have no problem knowing I’m forced to

sleep with someone else? Thanks a bunch.”

“No. Damn it, Kya, losing you will tear me up, but I don’t see a choice if you return. I don’t make the laws, but I will defend them to the end unless it means hurting you. Your father wanted me to protect you. He would have wanted you to take his place when the time was right. I am willing to break my promises to him, to give up everything I believe in, if you will go away with me. I don’t see another option.”

Reaching for his hand, she pulled him close and traced the scars on his chest, the one she had helped put there and the other older ones she knew nothing about. A warrior stood before her. A man who lived and intended to die by antiquated rules because honor claimed he should. Her lip trembled when she placed his hand over her heart. “Stand and fight beside me, love.”

“I won’t risk your life that way. You should be queen.”

“We live in a democratic society.”

He shook his head. “You live in a democracy, little one. I live in a dictatorship with a token advisory council.”

“Is that the way it was under my father?”

“No. Canar fostered a representative monarchy but a monarchy all the same. You and your line rule by divine right.”

She groaned and shook her head. “This is getting us nowhere. The world is full of war and desperation. God has more important things to deal with than choosing the leaders of countries. That’s why we have free will. I want to be a veterinarian, not a queen. I have no clue how to lead. This makes absolutely no sense, Ja.”

Ja closed his hands over her shoulders and tugged her gently against his chest. “Why won’t you just leave with me?”

She studied him. Truth and duty shone in his bearing. Ja was a knight, born to protect God and country. “You would never forgive me if I did. I can see it in your eyes.”

“I can’t deny that I think the clan needs you, but I won’t forgive myself if you’re forced to submit to another. You can’t change the way an entire society thinks because you want something different.”

She turned in his arms; her face pressed to the solid thump of his heart beneath her cheek. "With your help I can. Think about it. If we go in there and remove Rork from power, he'll no longer pose a threat. The people will listen to me if you're at my side. We can show them the benefits of a people driven government. Once they understand that I have no desire to be queen, they'll be forced to accept the change."

He tipped her chin up and brushed a feathery kiss over her lips. "You're lying to yourself, Kya. Every little girl wants to be a princess."

She tipped back in his arms and stared into his eyes. "Maybe... When it's all about the dresses and the shoes and the handsome guy. Not when it means responsibility and gut wrenching loss. I can't live without you and our baby."

"Then I'll find a way to bring him or her to you when I can."

She pressed her palm to his muscular chest. His arms encircled her, holding her close. "That's not good enough, Ja. You're right. When I was younger, I dreamed of what it would be like to marry Britain's Prince William. Mostly because he was the only prince I had ever heard of and he's incredibly good looking." Ja stiffened. She wrapped her arms tighter around his waist before he could step away. "But something always seemed off. Now I know what that was."

When she didn't continue, Ja pulled back. "What?"

"He wasn't you. He's a far away fantasy. You are the flesh and blood, defend-your-country-or-die-trying kind of guy. You make me forget selfish things and dream of them at the same time." She kissed the reddened skin beside his scar and whispered the truth against his chest. "I love you."

Ja closed his eyes, shutting her out briefly before he tipped his forehead against hers. "You're going to get us both killed, but there's no way in hell I'm turning you over to the council after that comment."

"So you'll help me find a way?"

He chuckled. "Do I have a choice?"

"Always. Free will, remember?"

Strong arms swept her off the ground. She squealed and grabbed his

shoulders to keep from falling until he settled on a stump with her cradled against him. "When it comes to you, little one, my free will flew out the window the first time you looked at me with those pretty eyes."

"Oh, Ja, that's not what I want. I'd rather you *chose* to stand beside me. I wish my father had never asked you to help."

Ja shook his head and smiled down at her. "You have this all backward, Kya. You chose me long ago. You were around one maybe a little older, and I was nearly twelve. I wanted so badly to hang with the big boys, but you used to curl up against me and take your afternoon nap. It embarrassed the shit out of me the first time you toddled over." He smiled and smoothed her hair back from her face. "You were such a tiny thing with wild, tawny hair and big eyes and a mouth that could be heard for miles. I tried to take you back home to your mother, but you screamed you head off until I allowed you to use me as a pillow. You settled against me with your thumb in your mouth and hiccupped yourself to sleep."

He laughed and dropped a tender kiss on the top of her head. "The other males gave me shit to no end until the day your father smiled at me and said, 'It takes a big man to engender such love. My daughter is a very lucky little girl.' After that I didn't protest anymore, though you followed me everywhere. And the others left me alone even when you called me your 'big, bwak keedy.' They must have figured if the king approved, who were they to criticize? Your father entrusted you to my care because he knew I would give you my life. You had become my shadow, and I found I did not like it when you wandered far from my heels."

She wanted to remember the story too. Wished she could remember the man who saw potential in a twelve-year-old boy. "That's sweet, but still sounds like a soldier taking care of the king's daughter."

He grinned and hugged her closer. "I suppose to some extent. But in case you've missed it, you tend to foster pretty strong loyalties on your own. I remember watching you one time. You were standing on top of a skateboard ramp laughing because you had completed some stupid stunt that none of your friends could do, not even the boys, and they were all

smiling and cheering. No anger or resentment because you had bested them, just an acceptance that you always would. I carried the image of that skinny ten-year-old girl in pigtails with me for years.”

She sat up and tried to picture a dark haired man close by that day but she could only see the excited faces of her childhood friends. “I remember that day. I thought I was so cool because I rode the board the full curve of the ramp and back up. I even stopped myself at the top instead of falling off somewhere in the middle. I was such a cocky kid.”

His deep chuckle rumbled through his chest. “When I found you again, I almost expected to see that knobby kneed little girl. Considering my intentions, I was a little freaked out. Instead, I found an incredibly desirable woman with my little tagalong’s turned up nose and amber eyes.”

She shifted away from him with a sigh. “I don’t believe you, Ja. How can you separate the king’s daughter from who I really am?”

Ja growled low in his throat and tugged her up for a toe-curling kiss. When he let her breathe again, he glared at her. “I can’t separate my images of you, nor do I want to. You’re the king’s daughter. And that sweet, little toddler. And the proud adolescent. And now, you’re the woman who makes my heart pound and my dick throb. Each part of your life has been a part of mine. Even when I lost you, I kept you with me. Don’t ask me to ignore that. I can’t say that I stand beside you purely because I want you as my woman. All that other stuff plays a part in who you are and why you drive me insane. Just accept that you belong with me so we can figure out how the hell to make it happen. And promise me if I absolutely can’t find a solution, we’ll walk away together. I don’t want to ever be without you again.”

Ja’s tender sentiment melted her reservations. “I can live with that.”

“Good, because I’m not going anywhere.”

Chapter Twelve—Ja's Departure

Shoulders stiff with worry, Ja paced in front of the patio door leading to the garden. "You can't come, Kya. I won't risk your life."

"But you'll risk yours? Damn it, Ja. Leave well enough alone until I can come along like you promised."

A scowl darkened his features, and she could see the wildcat behind his eyes. "Rork knows I'm alive. He'll send someone soon. I'm surprised he hasn't already. I can't allow him to hunt you, Kya. One of these days, he might get lucky and catch you without that wolf pack you call brothers. Someone needs to stop him."

"But it doesn't have to be you. At least not like this. Not alone." She took his hand and drew him away from the window. The baby fluttered in her stomach and her heart clenched. *Please, God, I can't lose him.* "Take some of the boys with you. Seth and Greg are Wyenko. Even if they weren't raised by the tribe, they would blend right in. You said yourself they're good guys."

"I cannot walk in there with two unknown cats if I'm trying to gain support without drawing Rork's attention. I'll have a hard enough time going unnoticed as it is."

"Then wait. You've held off for three months. What would be the harm in waiting a few more?" She rose on her toes to press a hard kiss to his mouth. He refused to see how much he meant to her. "I don't want you to die, Ja. Is that so hard to understand?"

He practically growled as he shoved her down on their bed. He loomed over her, his powerful arms forming a gentle cage. "Do you think I'll lose so easily?" His image shimmered in anger. Cat claws tore the comforter on either side of her head. His eye teeth lengthened as he fought to maintain his human form. "Rork will not win."

Her heart jumped but she didn't look away from the powerful being before her. He would not hurt her no matter how angry he became. "You could easily beat him in a fair world, but he is Dar's father. He won't fight

honorably. What if his evil is more than your strength can overcome?" She touched the rigid muscle in his jaw, trying desperately to make him understand. "Please, Ja. He destroyed my family once. Don't let him do it again."

With a snarl, Ja pushed from the bed. "Thanks for your faith."

She closed her eyes and counted to ten before she sat up and studied the stubborn, beautiful man. "That's not what I meant and you know it."

He did not look at her as he gathered his things, didn't even acknowledge her worries. He slid a knife into his belt and jammed a few provisions into a small sack that he slung over his shoulder before he strode out the door and into the night.

She watched him leave expecting him to turn back. He could not face such a fight without saying good-bye. When she realized he would not yield, she raced after him.

Ryan caught her arm as she neared the front gate. "Let him go, Hannah. He needs to protect you any way he can."

She shrugged off his hand. "I know that. He thinks I don't trust him to handle Rork."

"Is he right?"

"No. Of course not. I don't doubt him, just the sanity of this plan."

"Ja won't see the difference."

"I don't care. I can't let him go thinking that I don't believe in him."

Her biggest brother blocked the gate. "And if I tried to stop you?"

"I'd never forgive you. I'm not joking, Ryan."

He hesitated for a minute before he stepped aside. "If you're not back here in twenty minutes, I'm coming after you."

She smiled, unable to resist ribbing the conservative man. "Better give me a little longer in case I decide to give him a proper send off."

His brows nearly met above his nose as he scowled. "Gross, Hannah. Some images I don't need."

"Sorry." She hugged him briefly then ran down the trail. The trees swallowed the sound of Ja's footsteps. Darkness obliterated his tracks.

Desperate, she searched for a sign of him. None came. The trees were silent. No bird chirped or bug hummed to indicate his passing.

“Ja! Don’t leave like this! Ja!” A sob caught her off guard, building in her chest, stealing her ability to think rationally. “Damn it, answer me!”

She felt her way blindly, searching the moonless night with useless human eyes. Her heart thundered in her chest, and her breath came in little gasps. Why had she stopped to speak with Ryan? Fear she would never see Ja again sent Hannah stumbling down an unmarked path. Why did he refuse to understand? Rork had killed her parents, murdered his own cousin for the sake of power. Why would he hesitate to destroy Ja if the opportunity arose?

She did not see the branch across the path until she slammed into it. The impact sent her crashing backward. She landed on her side and skidded over the rocky dirt path. Her face scraped along the rough ground. Fortunately, her shoulder absorbed the majority of the impact. She sat up gingerly to assess the damage. Blood trickled from her cheek and elbow. She could still move her arm so she had not broken her shoulder, but it hurt like hell.

Taking slow easy breaths, she rose to her knees. Unexpected pain shot through her right leg and she sat down with a scream. Her cell phone lay shattered at her side. Panic threatened to overwhelm her, but she fought it down. If she didn’t return in a reasonable time frame, Ryan would come looking for her. Carefully, she explored the abrasion on her leg. The skin was scrapped from ankle to thigh. The bone didn’t seem broken there either, but her knee had already begun to swell.

Damn Ja and his irrational need to charge into battle when caution made so much more sense to her. No one faced a monarch and his army alone. “Ja! I hope you’re happy! Do you see what you’ve done?”

The bushes rustled and his chuckle soothed her anger as he squatted behind her. Strong arms circled her shoulders, drawing her against his muscular form. “Don’t blame me for your foolishness, Kya.”

She turned and snuggled onto his lap. The pain faded with his gentle

touch. "You left without saying goodbye. I had to stop you."

"Why? What does it matter?"

His cold tone sent a shiver through her, but he did not loosen his hold. Finally, she gave up with a huff and settled against his chest. Her fingers lightly traced the strong lines of his bicep. "Whether you believe it or not, I do have faith in you, love. I even understand your need to stop him, but I can't help my fears. You're stronger and smarter, but he'll fight dirty. He proved that with my parents. Promise you'll be careful."

Ja tightened his hold. "You didn't answer my question. Why does it matter?"

"It matters." Determined to make him hear her, she tipped her head back to find his eyes. "You claim that I belong to you, but you're my heart. When I thought you'd died, I couldn't breathe from the pain." The scowl returned to his forehead. With a shaky smile, she smoothed it beneath her thumb. "I loved your strength and passion before I knew more than your first form. I'm not asking you to abandon your sense of justice to pacify my fears, just wait until we can do this together."

"No. You're too vulnerable." He placed his large hand over the slight swell of her stomach and stroked their child. "I can't stand by and watch while Rork's henchmen destroy everything that matters to me. Don't ask me to."

Irritation rose at his typical male arrogance. Why did he get to make that decision? "Who will stop him from destroying all that matters to me?"

His kiss drew the sting from her fears. Ja's strong arms cradled her close. "I have no intention of letting him get that close. My cousin, Savarn, and many others will stand beside me. I won't be alone."

"But I will be. Something feels wrong. If Rork knows you're alive, why hasn't he tried something before now? What if he got to your contact? What if all of this is a trap? He knows you won't go down without a fight." She snuggled closer trying to meld her body with his.

His heart beat, soothing and steady, beneath her cheek as he slowly stroked her back. "You might be right, little one, but I can't sit idly by and

wonder. It's not in my nature."

"You said once that Rork has kept you on his radar since he came to power. If that's the case, he's aware that you won't wait for him to come for you."

"I know." Ja shifted to lay her on the ground. Careful to avoid her sore shoulder and leg, he stretched his long body beside hers, his arm solid and warm under her neck. "No matter what happens, this has to end." He kissed her, his lips little more than a whisper across hers. "I love you, Kya. Never doubt that."

Tender emotions burned her eyes and tightened her throat every time he articulated his feelings. "I don't."

"Then don't question me. I have to do this. If I had a choice, I'd consider it."

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and tugged him down for a longer kiss. "Make love to me before you go. Give me one last memory, just in case."

He groaned against her throat. "You kill my self-confidence every time you say something like that."

Desperate to make him smile, she wiggled her hips against his erection. "What? Make love to me? Trust me, you have nothing to worry about in that department, big guy."

He grinned and dipped his head to capture her mouth with his. His tongue swept between her lips and stroked against hers as his hand found her breast and kneaded gently.

She moaned and arched into his touch, greedy for his caress. He explored lower, nibbling down her throat. His tongue teased and taunted until she could do nothing beyond quiver for more. "Love me, Ja. Please."

"I can never tell you no. Why is that?"

"You can't say no because you're a horny tomcat, Ja, but I'll thank you to get off my sister." Ryan's deep voice shattered their private cocoon as he shone a flashlight into their eyes.

Ja laughed and eased away from Kya. He rolled to his feet with a ready

grin. "What the hell are you doing here, ya overgrown bastard?"

"Looking after her. Did you expect anything less?"

"It would have been nice if you'd kept her home where she belonged in the first place."

Ryan chuckled. "As if I could have. Ever tried to actually stop Hannah from doing something? It's pretty close to impossible most days."

Kya snorted and sat up. "I'm right here, you know. You two can stop talking about me any time."

Ja knelt beside her. His fingers brushed the scratches on her cheek. "You love being the center of attention and you know it, little one."

Her hand covered his, holding him close a moment longer. She caressed the tiny puncture scars on his wrist, marks she had put there when they made love. She couldn't seem to resist biting him, his taste and reaction made her hot every time. Unbidden tears burned behind her eyes, but she blinked them away. She wanted to throw her arms around him and beg him to be careful, but he did not need to carry her fear into battle. "I still want you to stay."

"I know, but this is one argument I can't let you win. If I don't come back, I want you to run. Disappear with our little one so Rork won't ever find you."

She shook her head. "You had better come back."

"I'll do my best. Now, promise."

She crossed her fingers behind his back and prayed he wouldn't hear the lie in her voice. "I will do what I have to do."

"Good." He lifted her knuckles to his mouth and kissed them gently. "Be safe, Kya, my love."

She couldn't speak around the lump in her throat. *You too. Come back to me. Don't leave me all alone.*

Ja picked up his backpack and disappeared. She stared after him, desperate for a last glimpse of his broad shoulders.

Ryan bent and lifted her against his chest. "Come on, let's get you back so Grant can take a look at you."

His solid strength did little to appease the anger and frustration streaming through her head. She settled against his shoulder with an irritated sigh. "Why does he have to be so damned pigheaded?"

Ryan chuckled softly. "If he wasn't, he'd never survive you."

Fear and worry returned to override her anger. "Why didn't someone go with him?"

"I tried. Grant and Jake did too. Actually, I think every man at the sanctuary offered to help."

"Why would he refuse back-up?"

"You know the answer to that, Hannah." Ryan stared forward using the narrow path as an obvious excuse to avoid looking at her.

The baby wiggled and she caressed the precious bump as tears threatened. "He left you behind to watch over us."

"He loves you. I can't fault him for that."

The entire compound full of men, wolves, and cats would have followed her arrogant warrior into battle if he had only bent enough to accept. Pride and concern for their safety made him rather face his enemy alone than take a guard off his family. She shifted to stare over Ryan's shoulder into the darkness where Ja had disappeared. She wanted to curl up and bawl, but anger returned to stiffen her spine. "If the stubborn idiot doesn't come back to me alive, I'll kill him again myself."

Chapter Thirteen—A Fresh Start

Two weeks passed before Hannah stopped crying at night. Then she lost all patience. Yes, Ja had told her to wait. Yes, she trusted him to handle the situation. Yes, she was pregnant and crabby and starting to swell like a damned balloon and scared shitless, but none of that mattered. Her gut told her something had gone wrong, and she couldn't wait anymore. Her daughter fluttered and Hannah rubbed the precious mound. "Don't worry, baby. Mommy's going to bring Daddy home." She gathered a flashlight and her pistol and stuck them into a shoulder sack before slipping from her cabin.

"Going somewhere, Hannah?" Ryan's deep voice met her before the door had fully closed. He and Jake stood a mere five yards from her front door.

"Thinking about it. Why? Do you have a problem with that?"

He reached to take the bag with her pistol off her shoulder and tossed it into the bushes. "Damned right I have a problem with it. I'm pretty sure Dr. Ferris will, too."

"I will what?" Grant walked around the end of her cabin and joined the boys. Four other young men followed him. The felines, Seth and Greg, were the only ones missing from the family group.

Jake stepped aside to allow Grant a clear shot at Hannah. "We figured you'd have a problem with letting her leave."

Grant shook his head. "Normally, I would, but she's right. Ja should've returned by now."

Jake scowled. "You can't let her go off alone like this. I'm going with her."

Grant lightly smacked the flat of his hand against the back of Jake's head. "We're all going with her. Go get changed."

With hoots and hollers of excitement, the boys hurried around the corner of her cabin. Less than a minute later, six very large wolf-men returned. Ja had told her that her brothers were shifters, but she hadn't

seen them in their in-between state before.

Ryan was easy to pick out. His natural dark coloring and size translated to the truly enormous black wolfman leading the pack. Jake, too, was fairly easy to recognize. He was so damned skinny he looked more like a coyote than a wolf, and his usual exuberance showed in his tail.

Hannah giggled. "I think your entire butt wags, Jake."

The skinny wolfman grinned.

Ryan moved to stand protectively beside her. "Your turn, boss. We'll keep her here until you get back."

Hannah stared at the older man. He had always seemed so ordinary despite his extraordinary capacity to care for others. "You, too? Am I the only one around here who doesn't know all this?"

"No. Harry doesn't know because he can't shift."

"Harry and Lynn, you mean."

Grant chuckled. "I didn't say that exactly."

"Really?" She tried to picture Harry's plump wife as a shifter but couldn't come up with an image beyond a ground hog or maybe an overweight rabbit. "I'm obviously in my own little world."

Jake laughed a wolfish chuckle. "I've always said you're thicker than a brick, Hannah."

"At least I'm thick somewhere, Jake. You're skinnier than a popsicle stick."

"That's not what she said."

"You wish!"

"Enough you two." Grant patted Jake's head before he left for his cabin. "Give me a minute. I'll meet you at the front gate."

* * * * *

Hannah's human form worked as a handicap as they moved through the forest and over the mountains. Her feet hurt and she could not move fast enough to stay with the boys. Jake shifted fully to wolf and ran ahead at one point to see how much farther they had to go. He returned an hour later.

His sides heaved and his tongue lolled from the side of his mouth. *Found 'em.*

Grant motioned for the young wolf to sit down. "How far? Hannah can't take much more."

Seven miles or so. Sounds like their planning a lynching party tonight. The whole place is filled with cats, though most are hiding their true colors right now.

Ryan sat down beside Jake's lanky form, offering the younger animal a shoulder to lean on. "How many?"

Thirty, maybe forty tops.

Hannah glanced from the exhausted Jake to a very worried-looking Grant. "Is Ja the guest of honor at the festivities?"

Jake looked down refusing to state the obvious and nausea swept over her in a fear-driven wave. *Oh God, don't let me be too late. Keep him safe just a little longer.* The small group that had seemed nearly invincible as they left the compound suddenly appeared ragtag and unprepared for such a formidable enemy. "Anyone have a plan on how to get him out of there?"

No one said a thing.

She had dragged her friends and family into a situation they couldn't win. Panic rose in her throat and she tried to swallow it down as she sank to a large rock and buried her head in her hands. "What was I thinking? I didn't even bring my gun." Her head swam with images of the ones she loved dead or dying. Bracing her arms on her thighs, she faced the group. "We can't go in there like this. They'll eat us alive."

Grant shook his head with a scowl. "I don't think so. It seems to me that most of the clan is in second form right now. You'll blend right in."

"But if it comes to a fight, I'll lose."

Jake snorted. "You'll lose if you try to confront Rork one-on-one no matter what form you take, Hannah."

"So, I'm screwed either way. If I allow my fears to control me, Ja will die alone and in vain."

Grant growled as he circled the group in agitation. "Damn it. You should

never have been left without a mentor.”

A mentor for what? What was he talking about? Truth hit her as she sought answers in the animalistic faces around her. *I can shift.* The realization opened her eyes to possibilities she hadn't considered. Ja always fought and trained as a cat. His lean muscles grew stronger and more agile. His claws and fangs became lethal weapons. She could never be as powerful as he was, but she stood a better chance of holding her own in wildcat form. As a human she remained weak and vulnerable. Too bad she didn't have a clue how to make it all happen.

Rising to pace up and down the narrow path, she worried her bottom lip with her teeth. Sometimes when her emotions ran high, when Ja pissed her off or drove her nearly insane with desire, she could sense the cat beneath the surface but how the hell did she call it out?

“Hannah?” Grant stopped her restless pacing with a hand on her arm. “What are you thinking, girl?”

The entire group stared at her, waiting for answers. “Will it hurt the baby if I shift?”

One of the boys she didn't recognize shook his head no. “My wife did it all the time during her pregnancies. The pups suffered no ill effects.”

Her hand shook as she patted the baby for strength. “Then can you guys teach me what I need to know? Is it the same process for you?”

Ryan shrugged. “Basically. Except you can't freeze halfway. At least I've never seen it done by a cat. It's all or nothing, I think.”

Jake leaped forward and nudged against her leg with a wolfish grin. *All you have to do is want it, Hannah.*

She laughed and rubbed his ears as his entire body wagged. “I want it. I'm scared half to death, but I have to do this.” Turning to find Grant, she tried to smile reassuringly. “You've guided me in everything else for the past few years. Wanna be my mentor on this one, too?”

As Grant nodded, the boys closed in with a unified howl, surrounding her with brotherly love and support. The weight of uncertainty eased but did not disappear.

Jake moved aside and Grant stepped up to face her. "You're sure?"

Hell no! The ground shifted beneath her. Dizziness threatened and receded. Cupping the precious mound of her stomach, she drew a deep breath. No matter how scared she felt or how inadequate, she could not allow her little girl to grow up without a father because her mother had been too afraid to save him. She nodded. "Let the insanity begin."

The boys all chuckled and Grant hugged her tight before he kissed her forehead and joined the circle. "All right, Hannah. You might want to sit down at least this first time. It could hurt a little." A collective grunt rumbled among the boys. "All right, it will probably hurt a lot." His eyes wandered over her jeans and Henley. "If you like those clothes, you should take them off as well."

Hannah blushed but he and the boys turned their backs, offering a sense of privacy behind a wall of support. She quickly undressed and folded her clothes into the crook of a nearby tree. Naked, she located an area relatively free of branches and rocks that she could injure herself on during the change and sat down. She pulled her knees to her chest and crossed her ankles in front of her privates so the boys couldn't see much. "Now what?"

Grant faced her and nodded, approvingly. "Okay, now close your eyes and focus on your muscles and bones. See them change in your head. Feel them grow stronger. Visualize your teeth lengthening. Call your true self forward."

Hannah tried to do as he instructed but nothing happened. She stayed the same, naked and foolish. She peeked through one eye to see if she had changed and missed it, but she remained weak and hairless. "It didn't work."

Ryan chuckled and squatted beside her. "Don't give up yet. Most of us grow up doing this from our twelfth year forward. Give yourself a break."

One of the giants, Donny, she thought, though he bore little resemblance to the shy young man she knew, turned to smile at her. "Think of your true name. Sometimes that helps. Focus on what you feel or think when Ja calls you Kya."

Hannah closed her eyes again and focused on Ja's animal image, his sleek muscles and black coat gleaming in the sunlight, his sharp canines moist and dangerous, his rough voice calling her name. *Kya. You belong with me. You're mine. Don't leave me, Kya love.*

When the change came, it burned through her body with liquid fire. Flames shot through her limbs, softening her bones. Her hands shortened, melding into paws. Her spine bowed and elongated as her heart tightened, and blood thundered through her skull. Gripping her knees, she struggled to remain conscious while agony turned the world black.

Screams surrounded her, in her head or aloud, she could not tell nor care. She caught the essence of her second form and jerked it forward. Power swelled her muscles and her mind embraced the feline within. When the pain receded, she slowly opened her eyes to the applause of her brothers. They moved closer and ran their hands over her long back.

The baby kicked her ribs in a comforting bump that added to her confidence.

Grant smiled. "You're beautiful. Bravo, Hannah."

The human name sounded wrong as she tested her sleek new form. *Kya.* "Of course."

She walked around the boys' protective circle pausing to acknowledge each one. She recognized them all. How could she have been so blind before? She'd been right about Ryan, Jake and Donny. That left Rip, the blue-eyed Casanova. The oldest one, Hank with his wicked smile. And last but not least, Jon, the nearly silent one.

"What do you think, guys? Do I look royal?"

Jake laughed. "Like a royal pain in the ass."

Rip shoved him aside. "Don't mind him, Kya. You look amazing even for a cat."

"I do, don't I?" Her legs shone a soft tawny brown in the light of the moon, and her muscles rippled as she moved offering a sense of power and sensuality. "How about if we go kick some butt? Anybody with me?"

The boys lifted their muzzles to the moon, howling their consent.

More confident than she had ever felt before in her life, Kya lifted her head and scented the air for Ja's presence. Everything hit her at once. The stench of rotting leaves beneath the bushes, the musky-human odor of the boys frozen in half-stage, the overwhelming perfume of Grant's aftershave—something she had never noticed before. Miscellaneous messages from across the miles floated on the breeze. Then she found him. The tinny aroma of Ja's anger and frustration combined with something evil, and the cloying scent of terror floated beneath it all.

Rage and fear gathered in her chest and pumped adrenaline to her limbs. He lived. That had to be enough. The simple thought became almost a mantra as she inhaled again and pinpointed her path. *He lives. He lives. He lives.*

Chapter Fourteen—Queen Kya

Kya took off in Ja's direction. Her feet flew over the rough terrain as she traced his personal fragrance across the miles. The boys followed but her only concern lie in finding her mate. She arrived at the edge of a clearing as two huge guards dragged Ja, in human form, before an older man. People and cats stood in a semicircle around the center of attraction. She growled low at the bruises darkening Ja's chest and arms.

The sound attracted the attention of a nearby cougar. He turned to stare. Golden eyes narrowed when he noticed the wolves behind her, but he did nothing to alert those around him. Did that mean he was on Ja's side?

The boys and Grant had crossed over fully to keep up with her. They slunk closer, silent but dangerous, ready to protect or assist in any way necessary.

The cougar glanced at Rork again then slipped quietly into the trees toward their group. *Kya?*

Kya nodded though she remained wary. The fact that he knew her name had to mean he had talked to Ja, right? Or it could be nothing more than a lucky guess.

I'm Savarn.

Relief flooded over her as Ja's cousin identified himself, and she laid her head against the other cat's with a sigh. *Thank God.* Kya stepped back embarrassed by her affectionate display. *Am I too late?*

Not yet, though Ja won't be happy to see you. Rork has demanded a public execution for Dar's death.

She looked over his shoulder toward the crowd gathered in the clearing. *What's the sentiment of the clan as a whole? Will I have support if I step into that ring, or am I going to my death?*

The cougar stiffened. *If I said Rork has many supporters, what would you do?*

Did he think she would walk away if the odds were too high? *Pray that*

we could win anyway. I can't leave Ja at Rork's mercy.

Savarn actually grinned. *Then you won't be alone.*

Heady relief eased the pressure from between her shoulders. *Can you show me where Rork's people are?*

The big cat turned to the gathering as Grant and the boys stepped closer to listen. *Rork's in second form, there by the back of the podium. The two men holding Ja walk the line between the factions. I don't think they'll be a threat either way. Over there, beside the tree stump, the man in green is head councilman. He'll support Rork as will the two other men with him and the light tan cat to his left. The rest I'm unsure of. I would say about thirty-five of the forty standing here today would celebrate Rork's downfall, but I can't guarantee it.*

If he was correct, or even close, they could win this thing. Confidence swept through her and pushed down some of the fear gnawing a hole in her stomach. *Will you help?*

Depends. Do you intend to cast my cousin aside like he assumes?

Pain tweaked at her heart and the baby kicked in agitation. She would leave the band of strangers long before she left him. He was the only reason she had even come. *Ja has spent the past several months trying to convince me the clan should come before him. He's wrong. If I can be with him, then I'll stay for his sake. If I can't, then I'll walk away with him.*

Then count on me. Ja's more brother than cousin or friend. I won't have him hurt.

Neither will I.

What about your dogs? He gestured toward the seven wolves behind her.

She scowled at the derogatory tone of his voice. *My family is loyal to a fault.*

He glanced at them again, pausing at Ryan's massive form and Jake's lanky one. *You're certain?*

Without doubt.

Then let's do this thing before it's too late.

Kya motioned for the boys to circle behind those Savarn had identified as hostile then turned her attention to the clearing.

Grant laid his muzzle on top of her head. *Are you sure about this, Kya? We can try it without you first.*

I'm sure. I won't let you fight my battles for me, and coming in later destroys the element of surprise. I don't see any other options.

He nodded and motioned the boys forward. *Let's make it happen then.*

Ja's guards had roughed him up a bit while she had been distracted. Blood ran from his nose and lower lip. She could feel the pain that came from broken ribs and a bruised jaw. Beyond that his self-disgust burned in her heart, as if he had failed her. Something he could never do. She would help him see the truth as soon as she pulled his arrogant, overly confident ass out of the mess he'd landed in.

Rork stared around the clearing, his anger evident in every portion of his body, his voice an embittered growl. "I sent my son to find and rescue Kya from the human world this bastard threw her into, but Ja killed him. He also crossed the line and impregnated the royal heir without her consent. He has tried to destroy everything you hold dear. He killed my son, violated my future bride, and dared to attack me in my home."

The circle stirred and growled in discontent.

"I can see no option other than his death."

Savarn stepped back into the circle and raised his voice. *Banish him. He can't be a threat if he's cast out.*

Rork scowled. "He has no respect for our laws. He would return and slit my throat in the night. Is that what you would have him do, Savarn? Are you as guilty of treason as he is?"

Kya crouched low and padded silently behind the circle, edging closer to Rork. Some clan members recognized her scent and closed ranks, hiding her from sight, but it was Savarn who kept Rork's attention averted.

I'm loyal to the bloodline, Rork, never doubt it, but I'm loyal to my cousin as well. His mistakes are common. He desired above his station and crossed the line. Any among us might have done the same.

Rork snarled. "He killed my son! You cannot rationalize that, Savarn. So unless you want to find yourself beside him on executioner's rock, shut your mouth. I won't tolerate disrespect."

Kya stood less than three feet from her parents' killer and bloodlust slammed through her brain. She leaped without thought. Her powerful muscles brought Rork's human body to the ground beneath her. She lowered her head, inches from his throat, and licked her lips. *Perhaps you should get used to disrespect, Rork. I doubt the devil has much tolerance for failure.*

"Kya?" Rork chuckled low in his throat. "You cannot win, girl. I'll have you beheaded beside your lover for this."

She risked a quick glance to the side to see if anyone threatened her from the circle, but those Savarn had identified as Rork's supporters faced the deadly fangs of her brothers. Savarn and two other cats moved forward to stare down Ja's guards. *I think not. See how they stare at my swollen sides? They know I carry the future within me. To kill me now would end your reign as easily as if you died.*

Rork snarled. "The brat's no more royal than its father." He dropped his voice to a threatening whisper. "And its mother is a common whore. No one will think twice when I kill you with your bastard still in your belly."

Was he bluffing? *Shall we test that theory?*

Rork growled low and vicious. She felt it through his chest. Then his change began.

She stared into his eyes as they slanted and darkened. *Don't do it, Rork.*

If she allowed his transformation, he would overpower her, but killing him during the change seemed unethical.

Ja lunged against his restraints. "Kya, watch out!" Savarn shoved one of Ja's captors aside and bent to free his cousin's hands. Ja continued to fight, desperate to reach her. "End him, Kya! Do it now!"

Rork turned to cat beneath her paws, but she waited until he reached first state before she pressed her unsheathed claws to his jugular. Only he would hear the words she whispered against his ear. *Be still and you won't*

die today, Rork.

Fuck you, cunt. He slapped the side of her head with a massive paw and red lights swam through her skull.

She did not release him despite the searing pain. Her claws dug deep as she held him pinned to the ground. *There has been enough death. I don't want to kill you.*

Because you can't. Guards! Get her off me or you will know the inside of hell!

"Careful, my love."

She looked up as Ja ripped the last of the duct tape from his wrists and leaped to stand beside her, still in second form. Even as a human he reassured her with his strength. Rork fought to escape and forced her attention back to him. She struggled to make herself clear while maintaining the meager control she had. *You killed my family. For that alone I should rip out your throat. Still, I'll give quarter if you step aside quietly.*

I'd rather die. Rork's roar echoed off the trees as he twisted to escape. His great claws ripped at her sides.

Blood ran from an open gash on her left shoulder. She screamed as breath-stealing pain crippled her.

Rork tossed her aside and rose to his feet with a snarl. *Weakling!* He shifted his attention to Ja. Ignoring her turned the advantage back to Kya's court. He squatted, evil in feline form, then leaped toward her bruised and bleeding man. Ja braced himself for battle but his battered human body was in no condition to fight.

Fair fight, fair game.

Kya sprang at Rork. Momentum bore him to the ground. Her teeth closed around his throat. She clamped down hard. Blood gushed into her mouth as she ruptured his jugular, but she did not release him. He slapped at her head and white and red fireworks exploded behind her eyes, but she held on. He swatted again. Claws raked across her torn side and she jerked back, coming away from him with a large chunk of fur and flesh. Rork's last

guttural growl sputtered to nothing as his blood covered the ground beneath her paws in a hot, crimson surge.

In that second she realized what she had done. She had killed another being without thought or care. Her stomach rolled. She turned away from the circle of onlookers as she spat out Rork's flesh. Shudders rocked her frame. Blood coated her tongue and covered her paws and chest in a scarlet mess—everywhere. She puked. Her body lurched, heaving in desperate gasps as she lay down, pressing her abdomen to the cool grass, protecting her child from its mother's weakness.

Ja knelt beside her, rubbing her back and calling her name, but the clearing swirled in a psychedelic spin. She could not concentrate well enough to hold her second form, and the agony of transformation caught her unaware. It ripped at the open wounds on her shoulder and sides and tore at her already heaving stomach until she lay naked and wretched on the ground. Ja ripped off his shirt and wrapped it around her. Grant appeared in human form to stem the blood pouring down her side.

She tried to rise, but Ja held her tight. "Be still. Let Grant help you, love."

She could not stay down. People were watching, waiting for her next move. She wiped her hand across her mouth, desperate to remove Rork's blood. Her unsettled stomach continued to protest despite her efforts to focus past the nausea as the baby kicked and fussed. She cupped the evidence of her precious child and rubbed gently to calm them both. *Hush, little one. It'll be all right now. Mommy and Daddy are here.* She blew out a calming breath and focused on the worry that tightened Ja's jaw. "Weakness equals suicide, remember? Let me up."

He hesitated then stepped aside, wounded pride evident in his beautiful eyes. "As you wish, my queen."

Grant offered her his hand and she rose on trembling legs with a smile of thanks before she glared at her stubborn warrior. "Don't be a jerk, Ja." She touched the bruise on his right cheek and blinked away tears. "I need you, big guy. Don't give up on me now."

He continued to stare a moment before he gestured Grant away from her. "I'm right behind you, Kya."

Love, pride, concern, all raced through her mind and stopped in her heart. She could do anything as long as he stood with her. She hid her shaking hands behind her back and stepped forward into the circle of six courageous wolves. Their hackles rose and their lips curled back over vicious teeth. No one would be brave enough to attack them to get to her.

At the edge of the tree line near a rock wall, more than half the group gathered. Cats of all colors waited for her lead. Ja's cousin leaped to a tree stump and glared toward the meager group inside the circle. Savarn lifted his head to be heard above the rumbling of the others. *Say the word, Kya, and we'll rid you of this Rork-loving vermin right now. My claws are itching for a good fight.*

Kya studied the people and cats trapped between the crowd in the back and her brothers to the front—a rock and a hard place. They seemed terrified, as she would have been in their place, and compassion flooded her. These were her parents' people, Ja's clan, and now hers. They had lived and suffered beneath the tyranny of a power hungry man for too long. In a fit of rage she had killed to protect those she loved. How many who huddled before her had sided with Rork to do the same?

With a brief glance over her shoulder to reassure herself she wasn't alone, she faced the crowd. "Who among you has not made a mistake? Who has not sacrificed pride or money or self-respect for the sake of life or loved ones?"

The crowd remained quiet but she had everyone's attention.

"I see before me my father's people—men and women who fought and sacrificed by his side. Rork changed all of that. He used threats against family members and individuals to control the entire clan. Some withstood his tactics better than others, but few thought to overthrow the bastard. Why? Because he was king, chosen by divine right to rule as he saw fit. Am I correct?"

A woman to her right dropped to her knees with folded hands. "Praise

God! He has sent us a true leader to guide us from this unholy mess.”

Ja snorted as he tried not to laugh, and Kya shook her head. “Stop that. God did not send me. I sent me.”

The woman appeared confused and then flattened herself to the ground. “God herself has come to show us the error of our wicked ways!”

Ja didn’t hold back his bark of laughter as he stepped closer. “Told you.”

Fighting the urge to laugh with him out of pure exasperation, she glared at the prostrate, wailing female. “Oh for crying out loud, get up and shut up. I am no one’s god.”

Ja’s shoulders shook as he fought a laugh. She ignored him and tried again. “Listen to me! What I am trying to say is that no one will be punished for past crimes. If you felt the only way to save yourself or your family was to bow to Rork’s demands, then so be it. That’s what you should have done. Now we start fresh.”

A young cat snarled from the sidelines. “You can’t mean to set these monsters free unpunished!”

“That’s exactly what I intend to do. All except those who willingly participated in the deaths of my parents and their body guards. They will be banished under threat of death.”

The crazy woman stood and threw her arms around the man Savarn had identified as head councilman. “No, please don’t banish him.”

“Banishment not death—there art thou happy!” She struggled to keep a straight face as she realized she quoted Shakespeare because she hadn’t a clue what else to say. Her head had begun to spin from blood loss. She shook it off. Ja edged closer. His solid hand nestled in the small of her back. She offered him a grateful smile before continuing. “No one should suffer for deeds done under duress. The present council will be disbanded and as of tomorrow morning a new one elected.”

Savarn scowled. “Elected by whom?”

“By you and anyone else who chooses to vote.” She’d stood too long. The edges of the clearing began to blur as her blood soaked through Ja’s shirt and ran down her leg. She reached for him and his solid arm circled her,

strong and steady.

Grant stepped behind her and pressed a bandage to the largest wound. "This needs to be stitched soon, Kya."

She drew a deep breath, anxious to make her point and sink against Ja's unyielding strength. "I, along with a few select advisors, will stay long enough to help establish order. Once the new council is in place, I'll step aside. You'll elect a leader from among you. One who was born and raised in the clan and who understands the complexity of its needs."

The young cat shook his head in confusion. "Why would we need someone else? We have you."

"You don't want me. Not really. I am not a leader."

"But you're the last of the bloodline."

"No, actually I'm not. I'm a wanna-be vet who hasn't even had the gumption to go to school yet. If you're simply looking for the right heritage, Ja carries royal blood, and he's qualified to rule."

The crazy woman laughed. "He's common."

Anger at the unjustified judgment from one so far beneath Ja's intelligence and integrity rushed through her. She bit back a sharp, snarky response and faced the group instead of snapping at the unbalanced attacker. "I think he's anything but common. How many men would risk their lives to save all of you?"

Ja brushed his lips over her ear and squeezed her waist. "Don't do this, Kya. They're right."

"No, they're not." She faced crowd with a scowl. "How many of you knew Ja's father?"

Savarn stepped up when no one else said anything. "Crayn was a good man."

Kya nodded. "As is his son." A strange vibe moved through the group in the center of the circle. She studied them, searching for the weakest, the one who would tell her what many of them obviously knew. One of the guards who had held Ja would not meet her stare. "You." She pointed at the man, and Ryan moved toward him, teeth bared. The guy stepped back from the

advancing wolf. His wide-eyed gaze shot to the podium. "Who are you?"

"Kyrk Walters, ma'am. I ain't nobody."

"What are you hiding, Kyrk?"

"Nothing."

"Bullshit." She stepped forward and black spots rushed into her head.

Ja caught her as she stumbled. "End this before you pass out, Kya."

She nodded and looked to the guard. "You're already on my hit list, Mr. Walters. I suggest you speak up."

He glanced around the circle, obviously uncertain. When his eyes found Rork's lifeless body, he grew pale. "I had nothing to do with it."

"With what? Tell me."

"Rork wouldn't let him go."

"This is getting tedious. Who are you talking about?"

"Sergeant Crayn."

Ja stiffened. "He's lying. My father died in Rork's prison."

The guard stepped closer, within easy reach of the wolves as if to prove to Ja he spoke the truth. "No, he didn't. That's what I'm trying to tell ya. Rork wanted him alive so he had leverage over you or your mom if he ever needed it. I thought Rork would kill your dad after your mother died, but he didn't. I s'pose he still saw you as threat."

Ja leaped forward and grabbed Kyrk by the throat lifting him from the ground. "Where?"

The smaller man shook his head unable to speak around the pressure on his windpipe.

Kya put a hand on Ja's shoulder. "Let him go." The guard's face turned red as he kicked to be free. Ja would kill the smaller man before he could tell the truth. "Please, love." Dizziness swept over her in a hot rush, and she staggered. Grant caught her before she could fall, but she could not shake the lightheaded feeling.

* * * * *

Ja saw Kya stumble. He dropped the guard and swept her from Grant's

arms into his own. The sudden movement twisted his broken ribs. It didn't matter. He could handle his own pain, just not hers. "Easy, little one. I'm here." He sat on the stump Savarn had used as a podium earlier and cuddled her close. The smell of blood pressed heavy in the air, and her frailty ate at his heart. He fought to remain calm. "Grant, stop this damned bleeding before we lose her. Savarn, find out what this bastard knows and get my father out of the hellhole Rork stuck him in." He cupped the side of Kya's face and brushed a soft kiss over her forehead. Her fair skin glowed nearly translucent. "Damn it, what the hell were you thinking?"

She attempted a smile. "That I can't live without you." Her hand curled against his chest as she settled against him fully. "Would you get rid of this crowd? I feel like a freak."

He chuckled. "That I can do." He motioned her eldest brother closer. "Hank, throw Rork's puppets in my father's cell until Kya's strong enough to deal with them. Release any other political prisoners while you're at it."

"How am I supposed to know who's in for what?"

"I'm sure Kyrk will be more than happy to cooperate." He glared at the coward. "Right?"

"Yes, sir." The guard still rubbed his throat. He hesitated a moment and tears shimmered in his eyes as he braved the wolves to kneel at his queen's feet. "Will she be all right? I didn't mean to upset her none."

Kya reached out and touched him. "It's okay. Do as Ja asked, please. Bring his father to him."

"Yes, ma'am."

Even in pain, she thought of others, naturally comforting them as a leader. Savarn, Hank, and three of Kya's other brothers herded the ten or eleven prisoners down a narrow dirt path. Ja raised his voice to be heard at the far end of the clearing. "The rest of you go home until tomorrow morning. We'll deal with all of this then."

The crowd began to disperse, but most of them filed past Kya, reaching to brush her arm in reverence, adding a respectful nod to Ja as they left. One older man stopped in front of the stump, his once golden hair silver.

“Do you remember me, boy?”

Ja nodded. “You were with Canar when he brought Kya to my family.”

“Yes. Do you remember why the king gave you his beloved daughter?”

“There was no one else.”

The elderly man nodded. “Partly. At the time, there was your father and a few other loyal soldiers, but they were busy fighting to save Canar and Tia. You were no more than a boy, but the king respected you. He knew you would fight to the death to save his child.”

Kya shifted to face the man more fully, a gentle smile on her lips despite the pain that radiated from her. “What made my father so sure? Why didn’t he hide me away and send someone older, someone like you, to find me later?”

The man touched his fingers to her cheek with a smile. “Ja’s father dedicated his life to the royal family as did his father, and his before him, but Ja also carries the blood of kings. Canar told me your family’s line would end and be renewed with you. He also believed Ja would be the key to the future.”

Ja snorted in disbelief, but Kya shushed him. “Go on, please.”

“When any royal family comes to power, there’s a shift, a waning of strength surrounding the previous one.”

His ribs protested as Kya adjusted to allow Grant better access to her side. Ja sucked in a breath to mask the pain and focused on the old man. “Get to the point. Kya needs rest.”

“Canar saw it. He knew the power would swing and come to you. God ordained it.”

Kya laughed almost triumphantly, and Ja wanted to smack the old guy for putting ludicrous ideas into her head. “I am nothing more than a soldier. God has nothing to do with me.”

“Who are you to say? Canar knew the moment Kya chose you that you would replace him.”

Ja shook his head. “If he had known, he would have stopped it.”

“He didn’t know when or how the power would shift. Only that it would.”

Kya smiled. "Told you."

Ja squeezed her lightly. "Be quiet. You're resting."

The old man laughed as he placed a hand on Ja's shoulder. "You can't fight fate, boy. You might as well sit back and enjoy the ride." He started to go then turned back. "I'll inform the others tomorrow that you bear divine right."

"It doesn't matter. Kya wants to elect the next leader."

"Why? The choice has been made. The two of you will rule together. Ordained and blessed."

Ja watched him leave before focusing on Kya. She had turned on his lap until she almost faced him fully. Her slender hands gripped his arms as Grant stitched her wounded shoulder. Her eyes were enormous in her too pale face. He brushed her hair from her cheek. "Still want to step down?"

She leaned on him with a soft smile. "In a heartbeat, especially after hearing that the people will support you as an excellent replacement."

"That's not what he said. Besides, they won't let you, you know. They see you as an extension of God."

Her laugh lessened the ache squeezing the oxygen from his lungs. "You'll be in the same boat soon. Besides, I can't help what they think."

"Neither can they."

She flinched as Grant stabbed the needle in too deep.

Ja growled. "Careful before I jab that pin into you, wolfman."

"Don't, Ja." She looked over her shoulder and blinked away the tears on her lashes. "I'm fine, Grant. Just get done pretty soon, please."

"I'm trying." He glared at Ja. "Like I'd hurt her on purpose."

Kya laid her forehead against Ja's chest with a sigh. "He knows that, Grant. He's just worried about his father. Ignore him."

Grant bent his head back to the hateful task, and Ja tossed him an apologetic smile. He tipped Kya's chin up and lightly brushed a kiss over her pale, pink lips. "You're right, I'm worried, but not about Dad. Savarn will take care of him. It's you I'm concerned about."

"I'll be fine."

Suddenly her stubborn will, her damned can-do nature, pissed him off. "If you'd have stayed where you belonged, none of this would have happened."

Irritation glittered in her beautiful, amber eyes. The problem with his protective statement flashed like a neon sign. "And where is it that I belong, Ja? Should I have hidden myself away in my kitchen, barefoot and pregnant? Should I have waited like a good little woman to become the perfect soldier's widow?"

At least you'd be safe. "That's not what I meant and you know it."

She pushed away from his chest with a glare. "No, I don't know. What do you want from me, Ja, a leader or a wimp? Tell me now so I can bow to your wishes."

Sarcasm dripped from her words. "Stop it." He caught her arms and shook her lightly before he thought.

What little color annoyance had returned to her cheeks disappeared and guilt slugged him in the gut.

Grant growled. "Keep her still."

Ja pressed his lips to her tawny hair in apology and waited. His patience stretched thin before the vet put a bandage over his handiwork and moved away. Once they were alone, he caught Kya's face in his hand so she had to look at him. "I never want you to be less than what you are, love."

She snorted. "Yes, you do. You ask me to give way all the time, Ja."

His gut twisted at the truth in her words. "You're right. Ignore me as necessary."

She chuckled and a fleeting grin tilted her beautiful lips. "I do."

God, I love her. He smiled at his incredible, sassy little mate. "I know I'm a jerk about this sometimes, Kya, but I hate the thought of you getting hurt, or worse." He feathered a kiss over her mouth but pulled away when she tried to deepen the contact. "I can't lose you."

"So, what do you plan to do about it?"

"You have to rule, Kya. They'll vote you in even if you don't want it."

"That doesn't answer the question, Ja. What are you going to do about

me? How do you keep me safe and still in the public eye?"

He knew what she was trying to make him say. She wasn't very sneaky. "I'm not leader material, Kya, no matter what the old one said."

"Really? Didn't you attempt to overthrow Rork for the sake of me and the clan?"

"And almost got myself killed."

"Only because you tried to do it alone. No one can stand without help for very long, not even you, Ja."

"What would you have me do? All I can think about is grabbing you and running until no one can find us. Now that Rork's gone, the clan will survive."

"And if someone like him attacks? What happens to your people then?"

He hated that she was right. It was the reason he had intended to bring her back in the first place. The clan would be easy prey without someone with both strength and compassion on the throne. But the thought of keeping Kya and their baby safe overrode his concern for the others. "Nothing. It dies. It thrives. I don't give a rat's ass."

She brushed a kiss over his mouth. "Liar."

"They won't accept me."

"They already have. Look around. Everyone scurried to do your bidding without question, big guy."

The empty clearing proved her point and he almost smiled despite how ridiculous the situation had become. "You don't hurry to do as I ask."

"That depends on how you ask." She trailed her fingers lightly down his naked chest. His whole body came to attention. "I can be very obliging with the right incentive."

"Now who's lying?" She tucked her head to his chest but not before he saw the impish grin flash across her face. He wasn't going to win no matter what he did, and for once, he didn't care. He captured her mouth in a long, sweet kiss. "I'll tell you what, little one. If you promise to be careful and listen to me when it's important, I'll give this a shot."

"Meaning?"

“I’ll rule with you. If they want you, they can put up with me. You look out for the general health and well being of the people while I take care of the rough stuff. That way you’ll be safe, or at least not quite so vulnerable.”

“And if something falls in between the two?”

“Then we’ll work together with the council to make it right. How’s that?”

“That sounds like a very diplomatic way to deal with things.”

“The clan won’t let you eliminate the monarchy all together. They’ll still consider you their queen no matter what you call yourself.”

“I know.”

He growled and pulled her against his chest. “I hate everything about this plan, but I won’t back down. I promise, Kya.”

“I know that, too.”

“So, now what?”

“We work together to rebuild what my father started, a representative monarchy. If we’re lucky, we’ll eventually move to a fully elected government.”

“Why not leave the monarchy in place?”

She took his hand and pressed it over her stomach. “Do you want your daughter forced to lie with someone she doesn’t love just because he’s royal?”

Images of a dark haired beauty with big amber eyes flashed in his mind, and protectiveness swelled at the thought of his baby girl. “Fuck no.”

“And if, heaven forbid, anything should happen to you, do you want me to accept another chosen by the clan?”

Thoughts of Kya beneath the hands of another man burned through his head. Rork had forced himself on three different royal brides and sent them packing when they failed to produce an heir. However, sending them away had not erased the fear and self-loathing in the young girls’ faces. Suddenly, the old traditions seemed as antiquated as Kya believed them to be. If the clan would adopt a different way, perhaps nothing like the past twenty years could happen again. “You’re right. This royalty crap has to go...as long as you remember one thing.”

“What’s that?”

He slowly traced the curve of her throat with his tongue until he reached the love mark near her collarbone. He sucked at it gently, careful not to hurt her while he reminded himself of all that she had given to him.

She writhed impatiently on his lap. “What?”

He growled low in his throat, as he responded to his mate. He had been without her sweet touch for too many weeks. Desire didn’t care that his entire body hurt. “I reign sovereign in your bed.”

She groaned and settled against his chest with a sigh. “Always, my king.”

Her words nestled deep in his heart destroying the lonely ache that had resided there too long. He could be anything, even a king, as long as she believed it so.

~ABOUT THE AUTHOR~

Born and raised in an ultra conservative part of the Midwest, Becca finds freedom in the pages of her stories. When not sidetracked by her laptop, she enjoys spending time with her family and friends, reading anything she can get her hands on, and touring the country on the back of her hubby's motorcycle. She loves feedback from readers and would love to hear from you.

Visit Becca at her blog: <http://beccadale.blogspot.com> or find her on Facebook.



Heart's Sentinel

Copyright © 2010 by PJ Snyder

Born human, Mackenzie never wanted to be a shapeshifter. After a shifter stalks and brutally Changes her, she runs to the jaguars of River Gap pride for protection from the stalker still searching for her, to come to terms with the attack and learn to control her new, powerful cougar body.

Adam, a River Gap Sentinel, is assigned as her guard and mentor. Well aware of his strength and how new she is the shapeshifter world, he holds himself back from the flames of primal desire she ignites. But, to survive the stalker, they both need to first battle their pasts and learn what it truly means to be the sentinels of each other's hearts.

~Excerpt~

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 drunk 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.

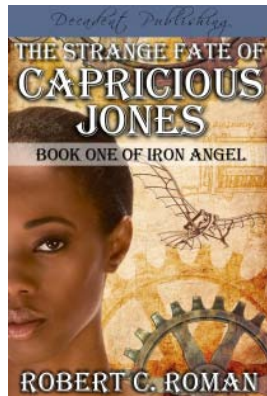
He did a good job with the reassuring, cheerful act. Mackenzie knew better. She'd seen the predator rise up in his eyes when he'd realized her identity. Between one breath and the next, he'd been bigger than life, filling the foyer with the promise of violence.

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.



The Strange Fate of Capricious Jones

Copyright © 2010 by Robert Roman

The Triple Alliance, led by Kaiser Otto II, struck without warning. The combination of Prussian military might, Austrian clockwork, and Ottoman funding cut through the unprepared Entente powers like a chainsaw through Brie; hamstringing Britain, pinning Russia, and very nearly destroying France. The year is 1908, and the Entente is almost defunct. One base in the south of France is all that remains in Entente hands. All that remains to defend freedom are three Engineers.

One is an ingenue.

One is crippled.

One is dead.

~Excerpt~

Capricious Fate Jones soared. The wind rushing past her face lifted her spirits and lifted her body ever higher into the air. Below her the countryside stretched for miles, every stream and hill brought close by the lenses in her goggles. To the west, the horizon curved away over the Atlantic. In the distance, a huge cargo airship bound for the States was at the edge of visibility. Banking to the

left, she could just make out the Pyrenees. Leather creaked quietly. The sound of strained leather was barely audible over the roar of her Engines, the quieter rush of wind muffled further by the woolen insulation in her helmet.

Cap frowned; the leather gear connecting her to her wings was supple, not prone to creaking. Some of the leather in her flight cap was hard, but it wasn't under stress. All of her leather, hard or soft, was properly oiled and cared for. The only hard leather under stress was in her wings, fashioned of cloth and leather and thin wood. Thinking on them, she smiled. Orville had been such a gentleman, providing her with the proper conformation for the wings. It was a pity he was so much younger than Cap; she might otherwise have dallied with him rather than David.

The rush of a sudden updraft washed away her melancholy. Soaring high in the sky, she was free as she never had been on the ground. In the sky, no one cared that she had been born a slave. Floating on the winds, no one cared that under the thick insulating linen she wore bloomers instead of breeches. Driven by her Engines and lofted by her wings, no one cared that she had not only borne a child out of wedlock, but done the unthinkable and acknowledged her openly.

Thoughts of Kay made Cap realize how long she had been up. The gauge on her right epaulet showed her tanks half full of a secret mixture of distilled naphtha and jellied alcohol. On this, her first flight, she had no intention of letting them drop lower. Her wings were too short for her to glide safely to the ground, and her parachute was as experimental as her Engines. She gave one last longing glance at the snow-capped Alps. With a wistful sigh, Capricious leaned to her right to bank back towards David's manor.

Halfway back around, Pyrenees once more in sight, she heard the distinctive sound of stressed leather snapping free. Her wings began unraveling, and she knew without doubt that she was going to die before she saw little Kay again.

After exiting the mechanical carriage that had dropped her on the road outside Abrams manor, Leigh made her way through what once had been a lush, green lawn. She had vague memories of that lawn, but the grass was gone now, replaced

by a vast mustering point pounded flat by the Mechanical Men of the American Expeditionary Force. They stood in orderly rows, guns ported in sheathes across their backs, various melee weapons clamped to their bodies. The image of military power should have made her feel safe.

As Leigh walked, she passed through alternating sun and shade; most Mechanicals in the camp were taller and broader than a man. Just before she reached the manor house proper, she paused under a huge Command Mechanical, the only one in this camp. Looking up from beneath it, she admired the way the articulation for each of the four legs had been armored to prevent sappers from flinging explosives into the joints. A single charge could kill off the entire crew if a sapper got lucky. If the officers commanding them were killed, the Mechanicals became unstable. They might go on fighting everyone, including each other, until only one remained, or they might just stop moving.

At least, that's what her trainers told her.

Finally, Leigh stood a bare half dozen paces before the doors of the converted château that served the American Expeditionary Force as a headquarters. Enlisted bustled past her on both sides, their annoyance thinly concealed, their tongues stilled by the officer's tabs on her epaulets. Those same tabs drew quick salutes, held until the rankers passed her. A few, thinking her engrossed in the orders she held clutched in her hands, stared surreptitiously at her in passing. With the massive losses of the last few years, Lady Officers in the States had become commonplace, but the Expeditionary Force hadn't received many yet.

A few did more than glance, and she felt her skin begin to heat. Not for the first time she cursed whatever fate had overindulged when blessing her with feminine attributes. Self-consciously, she adjusted the thick leather belts that stretched across her midsection. On a man or a less well-developed woman, they would be arrayed across the chest and waist, allowing easy access to sidearm, supplies, and tools. For Leigh, they formed an ersatz bit of corsetry, adding more support to the patently inadequate undergarments supplied by the Women's Army Corp. The leather in place, she smoothed the rough linen of her uniform dress, marveling at the feel of it. On the one hand, it was the first new dress she'd ever

owned. On the other, it was an ugly thing, all rough olive fabric made for durability rather than fashion.

A junior officer strode from the building, his purpose obvious in every step, his bearing military and correct. His hair was cropped too close to tell his natural color, showing him to be a recent graduate of one of the academies. His shoulders bore the single gold bar of a junior lieutenant and the mailed fist of Mechanical command.

The lieutenant's eyes met hers, and he nodded with perfunctory respect. It was the greeting of a proper gentleman to a lady of unknown provenance but proper bearing. Silently, she thanked him for that small favor. A moment later, she saw his gaze drop away from her face, drawn like lodestone to a magnet. Leigh watched as he realized how disrespectful he was being and snapped his gaze back to hers. He realized she could tell he'd been staring and looked away, abashed. Then, as if against his will, his gaze crept back toward her.

The fact that he'd stopped walking entirely was a sign of his distraction. He thought of himself as a gentleman; when he realized he'd begun staring again, he locked his gaze on her eyes. Then his gaze wandered again. He had begun to show the look of disbelief so familiar to Leigh. Her dusky skin didn't blush easily, but once it started, it was impossible to stop. She felt the warmth in the swell of her breast, knowing that within seconds it would crest her collar and rush across her face.

Desperate to distract him, she rustled the orders in her hands. Desperate for her distraction, the young would-be gentleman snapped his attention to the orders. Recognizing them instantly for what they were, he glanced at the tabs on her shoulders that mirrored his own, save hers bore the twin turreted castle of an Engineer.

"Ma'am? Are you lost?"

His voice matched the rest of him. Strong, confident, with just the faintest hint of affected ennui to give the impression that no matter what crisis lurked, he had seen worse. Her plight hadn't moved him; he realized she had caught him staring, and was trying to find an excuse for his rudeness. Were she one of the Ladies

she'd so often wished to be, his thin ruse would never have worked. Leigh, however, had no such claim to gentle heritage.

"No, Sir, I am not. I have been ordered to report directly to General March at noon today."

His condescending chuckle sped the blush across her face. Between the blush, the heat of the day, and the constriction of her belts, she was rapidly becoming lightheaded.

"Miss, your promptness does you credit. It's only half-past eleven. However, you're quite obviously inexperienced with how these things work. When you're ordered to report to the commander, you report to the headquarters, not the commander's office."

"Oh? Really? I'm so thankful you were here to correct me, Sir. Could I perhaps impose upon you for directions, then?"

The look of barely suppressed consternation on his face was worth the additional time spent in his company, Leigh decided.

"Lieutenant Sebastian Cole at your service, Miss?"

"Lieutenant Leigh Abrams, Sir. You do, I suspect, have me by date of rank. That's how these things are done, am I right?"

Yes, his consternation might be her only compensation for the stares today, so she would enjoy it while it lasted.