



UNTAMED: Dacien and Tia
Naomi James

Warning

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Naomi James

Untamed: Dacien and Tia

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my children who are patient and understanding when I need “Mama” time to write;

To my parents, sisters, extended family, and friends, whose unfailing prayers and support, keep me encouraged more than they could ever know;

To my ‘twin’ Aunt, whose novels sparked my love of romances and adventure all those years ago;

And lastly, to the dedicated ladies of R.I.C.H. who generously share their talents and insight even as they work to meet their own deadlines. I love and appreciate you all!!

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Prologue

The three-story red brick building bore no name and sat solitarily on the corner of State Street as if it had materialized out of thin air. Spider web-like cracks ran the length of the structure and sections of bricks were either broken or missing completely. Several windows had been destroyed and the rest were painted black to allow light neither in nor out. No sound came from within, making it appear for all the world to be deserted.

If not for Jaden's insistence that Salsa Night was indeed going on inside, Tia Matthews would have written it off as another disappointing Friday night and gone home. Instead, she pushed several thin braids behind her ear and continued walking down the long sidewalk toward the large structure.

The night air whistling around them was chilly for late spring and she shivered, vigorously rubbing her hands up and down her cocoa-hued arms. Glancing down, she stopped to straighten the spaghetti-strapped, knee-length dress before hurrying to catch up to the others. It was Lydia, the first person she'd befriended since relocating two months earlier, who had insisted she wear the little black dress to show off her curves and shapely legs.

Tia surveyed the little group. There were five of them in all. In addition to Lydia, Jaden, and herself, there was Nakia and Corey, who had

relocated from Memphis and Houston respectively and were in the same project management training program as she.

Aside from Jaden, they would all have to endure one final relocation before settling in their chosen cities. Jaden, a Chicago native, was the night's entertainment coordinator. Thus far he was failing in that capacity.

"Come on, Teeta." Lydia's sultry voice called out the pet name as Tia fell into step beside her. "You look fabulous, little sister. Don't worry!"

She smiled at the compliment.

"I swear, the *Night Scene Today* email said 'Festival Friday' is happening here tonight," Jaden insisted, gaining their attention as he stepped over long unused railroad tracks while crossing the street.

"Well, it appears whoever placed the ad changed their minds and didn't tell anyone," Tia countered. "Tell me something. *If* 'Festival Friday' is happening tonight, where are the cars?"

"And why isn't there any music?" Lydia added, pulling her chestnut hair out of her eyes.

"That's what I'm saying," Tia continued. "It doesn't make any sense. Where are the people? There should be *someone* around, aside from us." She was beginning to feel anxious and more than a little foolish for going along with her overzealous new acquaintance's idea of a fun night out. Then again, it wasn't as if she wouldn't have gone out with them anyway. They were a good group of

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people to be around. Clubbing just wasn't her thing...not anymore.

A little grin tugged at the corners of her mouth. Back home, her girlfriends had 'kidnapped' her for one last night on the town before her job change.

Her smile faltered.

At times, she longed for the simplicity of home and missed her family and friends. Melancholia attempted to settle over her as memories jockeyed for dominance in her mind. Tia shook herself free of her gloomy thoughts.

Okay, get it together. You're twenty-seven, single, and reasonably attractive with a great new career. Enjoy it!

"Tia has a point," Nakia said softly, effectively pulling her back into the conversation. "Where is everyone?" She stopped in her tracks, staring pointedly at Jaden, which was surprising because she was usually the most laid-back person in the group.

He heaved an exaggerated sigh. "They've probably found some other place to park, that's all."

"If something doesn't happen soon, I'm going home," Lydia announced. "So, what are we going to do, people?" Having stopped as well, she folded her arms and leaned on one hip.

"Come on, guys. Let's at least check the place out before we give up." Jaden searched the group for an ally.

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“Nah, this whole set up doesn’t feel right.” This coming from Corey, who until now, had silently observed the exchange. “This has T.T.K. written all over it.”

“What is T.T.K.?” Tia asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“Take, Torture, and Kill,” Corey supplied. “Don’t you watch horror movies?”

A shiver snaked down her spine. “No and by the sound of it, you shouldn’t either, fatalistic Freddy.”

Nakia turned her face away, trying to conceal her amusement.

Lydia laughed out loud.

“Well, I don’t care what ya’ll say, anyone riding with me had better come on if you’re coming,” Corey warned, his long strides carrying him back the way they had come.

Jaden jogged the last several feet to the door and raised his hand to knock. The door swung open to reveal the sound of merengue music and laughter coming from within.

An attractive, sable-haired man with ice-blue eyes, a shock of white at his temples, and a tanned complexion stood just inside the entrance. He spread his palms wide.

“Welcome, friends. I am Andre, your host for the evening. Please, join us.” He moved aside to usher them inside, even calling out to a reluctant Corey to join the festivities. While the others stepped over the threshold, scoping out the scene before them, Tia hung back, still feeling a little

uneasy.

“Come on,” Corey said, looping his arm through hers to pull her forward. “If I’m going in, you’re going in.”

Once beyond the door, she extricated herself from Corey and playfully pushed him in the direction of the others. She tapped Andre’s broad shoulder to gain his attention before he could get swept back into the dancing crowd. His piercing gaze swept over her appreciatively and she suddenly felt silly about her lingering apprehension.

“Yes?” He tilted his head and waited.

“The cars,” she blurted. “There were no cars when we pulled up. Where did all these people park?”

His brow furrowed. “Did you not see the drive leading to the underground parking garage?” He yelled to be heard over the music that seemed to swell with the pulse of the crowd.

“I...I guess not,” she conceded. “What about the music? We couldn’t hear it outside.”

Andre eyed her strangely. “Soundproof doors,” he responded, walking away before she could question him further.

“Are you satisfied yet, Ms. Columbo?” Jaden teased, having overheard the exchange.

Tia smiled up into his laughing eyes.

“Yes, Teeta, we’re inside now. Let’s have some fun!” Lydia shouted, snapping her fingers to the beat. “Hey...I think I see the father of my future

children.”

The heated look Lydia flashed the gentleman in question was purely catlike, matching her green eyes. She smoothed her palms along her curve-hugging, violet dress and licked her lips. She winked at Tia and Jaden. “See ya.” She sauntered away, swaying her hips purposefully as she approached the attractive stranger who, if eyes could tell the tale, was just as interested in her as she was in him.

Shaking her head in amusement, Tia moved to the side as, one by one, her new friends paired up with dance partners and twirled to the beat.

“Tienes gusto de bailar?” a deep voice murmured in her ear.

“Excuse me?” She turned, seeing first the loose-fitting black slacks and a cream-colored polo shirt. She looked higher, into the man’s serious brown eyes.

“Forgive me, Senorita. I am Fernando. I say...would you like to dance,” his heavily accented voice shouted.

Tia placed her hand in his. “I would love it.” She decided to relax and go with the flow, laughing delightedly as she was spun onto the dance floor.

Regrettably, it was a night she would never forget.

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Chapter One

Early November

One year later

Buzzzzzzzz.

Tia started as the cell phone vibrated loudly, clanging across the table. The dour-faced librarian leaned around her monitor to throw a dirty look her way.

“Sorry,” she mouthed, snatching the phone and flipping it open. She cupped a hand over her mouth and the receiver. “Hello?”

“Tia?” It was Kelli, her closest friend from home.

“Hey, girl, what’s up?”

“Where are you?” Kelli questioned.

She frowned in confusion. “I’m at the library. Where are you?”

“I’m at your apartment.”

“What!” she shrieked, glancing at her watch. She received another scowl from the librarian but ignored her as the time registered in her brain. Nine twenty-six! Sweet Lord! She’d been at the library for over five hours!

“Crap! I’m sorry, Kel.” Balancing the phone between her shoulder and cheek, she frantically shoved papers and books in her bag. “Sit tight. I’m on my way.”

“Don’t worry about it. Your landlord let me in,

after I passed a round of twenty questions,” Kelli laughed.

“Good, ok, I’ll be there in forty minutes or so.”

“Alright, see ya then.”

Tia flipped the phone shut and hurried from the library, stopping only long enough to drop off one partly read *Ancient Cultures* book at the front desk.

She glanced at her watch again; nine twenty-nine. If she hurried, she’d be able to catch the nine forty-five home.

She dashed out the door and down the sidewalk with her bag dangling precariously by one strap. She awkwardly stuffed papers and a book inside as her heels clicked nosily upon the pavement. People gaped at her; she didn’t have time to care. She deftly dodged rack after rack of late fall sidewalk sale leftovers as store clerks rolled them back inside for the night.

Hopping to the left to avoid another rack, she spun around, side-stepped again, and continued on her way. The heavy bag jumped from her shoulder to the bend of her elbow. She slowed enough to check its contents, making sure nothing had fallen out, but didn’t stop. Righting it once again, she focused forward, ran smack into a clothing rack, and landed in a tangled heap while her papers floated lazily to the ground. As she rolled onto her back, a bra plopped across her face. She burst out laughing and couldn’t seem to stop.

Working ninety hours in five days had left her

incredibly fatigued, yet sleepless, and it appeared the absence of sleep had finally gotten the best of her. Now she lay in a pile of clothes, guffawing like a lunatic and she had no one but herself to blame for her exhaustion. The overtime pay was incredible. So instead of sleeping in on her off day, she'd felt compelled to work a few hours before heading to the library to research everything she could about ancient cultures. She had no idea why she'd developed a sudden interest in the subject and at the moment, she didn't care.

Eyes brimming with tears of mirth, she sat up and began to straighten the pile around her. The proprietress began screaming at her, alternating between Korean and English while snatching fallen articles from the ground.

Tia sobered quickly and scooped up an armload of clothes. "I'm sorry," she began.

The tiny woman merely sneered at her and snatched the articles from her outstretched arms. Angrily waving away Tia's attempts to help, she shouted, "No, no, you go now! You go!"

"Alright, I'm going," she relented, shifting to her knees to stand.

A large hand with long, tanned fingers reached down to her as an undeniably masculine voice chided gently, "You should try to be more careful."

The rich timbre, laced with a Scottish brogue, floated around her, compelling her to turn, albeit awkwardly, since she was on her knees. Her eyes traveled past slate-colored slacks, past his navy

dress shirt, and higher. *Lord, he's tall!* Yet between the street light shining brightly from behind him and her current position on the ground, it was impossible to discern his features.

Tia placed her hand in his and was pulled to her feet. The man didn't release her, instead keeping her fingers clasped gently yet firmly in his. "Thank you," she breathed, peering up into long soot-colored lashes that rose and fell over hypnotic emerald eyes. Inexplicably, those eyes darkened to a deep forest color. Something primal and wild flashed within their depths, yet it happened so quickly she wondered if she hadn't imagined it. It didn't matter, she couldn't have torn her gaze away if she'd wanted to...and she didn't want to.

His eyes crinkled at the corners as his sensual mouth spread to reveal even, white teeth. There was something about this man; something dark...dangerous...familiar, though for the life of her she didn't know why. She stepped back uneasily, reclaiming her fingers from his grasp. Without a word, they retrieved her things. As they worked, she chanced side glances at him, trying not to notice how his shoulder-length black hair swayed toward her as he moved. His hand brushed hers once and the jolt that shot through her caused her to jerk away.

She stumbled sideways.

The man eyed her curiously as he steadied her.

Tia lifted her bag onto her shoulder, her hand automatically covering the strap to hold it in place.

“Thanks again.” Was that breathless voice really hers?

He inclined his head but said nothing.

The proprietress shouted again, “Hey, Jade eyes, you wan move you big foot? Be happy I not make you buy!” The second the man lifted his foot, she snatched the item away and continued to rant, stopping from time to time to rail at them both.

Tia released a breath in one harsh puff as the stranger’s eyes slid from hers to stare at the irate woman. Incredibly, the proprietress went from screeching harpy to doe-eyed flirt. The woman grinned and giggled like a school girl as she set about cleaning the rest of the mess.

A soft breeze swirled by, causing several of Tia’s braids to fall over her shoulder and sway forward. The man’s head snapped in her direction, his viridian gaze locking onto hers. His nostrils flared, catching her scent; a light mixture of warm vanilla coupled with a hint of jasmine. He inhaled deeply, pulling his plump lower lip into his mouth.

Transfixed, she watched the tip of his tongue glide across it as if he could taste her there. Goosebumps broke out all over her flesh as she wondered what his tongue would feel like gliding over her bare skin. *What? No, stop it.*

His deep voice penetrated her brain, startling her. “You’re going to miss your train.”

Gasping, Tia flicked her wrist out in front of her. “Nine forty-two? Damn!” Without a backward glance, she sprinted down the sidewalk.

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* * * *

Thank goodness for crowds and troublemakers. Had both not been an issue when she arrived at the station, she would have missed the train. She loosed a small sigh of relief and waited patiently for the police to escort the irate man from the platform. The waiting crowd was unusually large for this time of night, which was fine with her. Considering the darkness, she felt somewhat safer among them anyway.

As she waited for the train's doors to open, her thoughts strayed to the attractive stranger with the panther-like eyes. He'd stared at her like a starving man spying the last tasty morsel on earth. Her body tingled all over again just thinking about it. Who was he? Would she ever see him again? She hoped so...

"You left something."

Tia whirled around.

There *he* stood as if plucked straight from her increasingly wicked thoughts. He held the thick book of poetry out to her but she didn't reach for it. She couldn't, captivated as she was by the heat radiating in his eyes as they traveled the length of her.

Clearing her throat, she finally managed to retrieve the heavy book from his grasp. When she did, his index finger extended to stroke the back of her hand.

Her eyes shot up to his as her heart-rate doubled.

His unwavering stare met hers.

She flushed.

"Thanks," she murmured, granting him a brief smile before turning her back to him self-consciously.

"You're most welcome Ms...?"

"Tia," she responded over her shoulder, purposefully withholding her last name. There was no time for further conversation. The crowd surged forward as one and piled into the waiting car. She ended up standing at the very rear of the tightly packed car but she couldn't complain. At least the many vents were working. Thank God. In fact, they worked a little too well. But again, she couldn't complain. She tilted her face to the ceiling to receive the cool blast gratefully. A movement from behind caught her eye.

She glanced over her shoulder. *He* stood directly behind her and was watching her.

Her head whipped back around, her eyes darting back and forth nervously.

What is he doing here?

For some unknown reason his nearness unnerved her; not in a creepy way but in a pleasant, anticipatory sort of way. Still, she became fidgety, unable to decide what to do with her hands. She settled for placing one on the wall for balance and holding the straps of her bag to her shoulder with the other.

Tia shifted from foot to foot. "Oh, sorry," she said over her shoulder after her movement

unintentionally brought her foot down squarely on top of his.

“You’re fine,” he assured her in a sensual whisper that rumbled across her skin. The faint caress of his breath on her ear made her shiver.

The car came to the first of its many stops to admit even more people. Tia sucked in a quick breath as the crowd crushed against her. She took a careful step backward in order to preserve the inch of space between herself and the passenger in front of her. The move brought her skirt-clad bottom into direct contact with her mystery man’s slacks-covered front. When had he become *her* mystery man? Embarrassed, she inched forward and received a glare from a balding, rotund man who sneered at her as if she had just spit on him. Refusing to be intimidated, she returned his glare with one of her own until he again faced forward.

The overhead lights flickered on and off sporadically as the car lurched into motion. At times, the lights flicked off for long seconds, plunging the group into near total darkness before shining brilliantly once again.

A woman shrieked unnecessarily, drawing an irritated glance from a frazzled mother who had only just managed to get her fussy infant to sleep. Other passengers alternately grumbled and chuckled in their conversations as they were knocked together.

The car shifted again and her heavy bag dropped from her shoulder to the bend in her

elbow. She lost her grip on the wall and would have fallen against the hostile man in front of her had the stranger's arm not shot around her waist to steady her against his solid form.

"I've got you," he murmured smoothly. The heat of his body penetrated her thin blouse as surely as if his bare flesh touched hers.

Tia opened her mouth to thank him but was shocked to silence when his body subtly rubbed against her own. It was a slow, deliberate, and thoroughly arousing act. Her breathing quickened but she didn't move away. The heady aroma of his masculine cologne invaded her senses as the hard planes of his chest pressed against her from the base of her neck to the middle of her spine. She felt him shudder as he straightened, his body never breaking contact with hers.

He buried his nose in her hair and inhaled.

Her eyes met his and held; dark brown to deep emerald, captive in a spell neither wanted to break. His lips hovered mere inches from hers, and a quiet rumble arose from his chest, vibrating against her back. She relaxed against him, experimentally rubbing her hair against his shadowed cheek.

Without warning, his fingers splayed wide over her belly and his arm tightened like a steel band, pressing her bottom flush against his erection.

Tia gasped and the lights flickered out.

The stranger covered her mouth with his and she froze, trying to steel herself against the

deliciously decadent sensations sizzling through her. She whimpered as his firm yet soft lips skimmed over hers, tasting, urging a response from her. Her eyelids fluttered shut in response to the gentle coaxing of his kiss. The hand at her waist stroked her belly methodically in an attempt to bend her to his will.

It was insane to allow, no, to encourage this man, this stranger, to kiss her like this, touch her like this but she was powerless to stop it. His fingers were working their magic on her as if they had done so countless times. Still, a tiny voice in the back of her mind admonished her for what she was doing, especially with so many people close by. Had she been thinking clearly, she would have pulled away immediately and fled as far from him as the train car would have allowed her to go.

Tia decided then and there she was not herself. Instead of being chagrined by her lapse in judgment, she reveled in the feelings he invoked. She'd never done anything like this before nor felt so responsive to anyone. The experience was hot, exciting, and the darkness surrounding them made it even more so, though at this point she doubted she would have cared had the train stopped and a spotlight blazed in their direction.

The stranger's lips left hers to trail along her neck. He paused to push her braided hair to the side, growling softly as he suckled and nipped at the sweetness there.

As she leaned against him, her bag fell,

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forgotten, to the floor. She tilted her head, allowing him greater access to the skin he sought and pushed her fingers deep into his ink black hair even as his hands slid upward to knead her full breasts. Soft mewling bubbled up from her throat as she arched into his palms.

The lights flickered, injecting a small measure of awareness.

Tia came to herself as his lips pulled from her skin, her body ablaze from where he had caressed her. Her breasts felt heavy, her panties moist with want.

The lights came on and her eyes flew open. She snatched her hands down as the stranger nonchalantly covered her front with a trench coat she hadn't realized he had.

The car screeched to a halt into yet another station, and a small portion of the crowd disembarked. An audible sigh of relief permeated the air as most of those in front of her moved forward.

"Stay where you are," his whispered voice commanded.

Startled, her gaze flicked from his chiseled jaw to his eyes. Though outwardly he appeared detached and collected, his breathing rasped hotly in her hair and his bulging erection pressed insistently against her bottom. She faced forward again, secretly thrilled not to be the only one affected by their encounter.

The man continued to caress her belly while his

other hand traced a path to her thigh, drawing lazy circles under her skirt before inching, with agonizing slowness, under the elastic of her lacy bikini panties.

Tia held her breath, her eyes darting around frantically, but she needn't have bothered. No one paid them the least amount of attention. As casually as she could, she angled her hips backward, away from his questing fingers. The action only served to press her bottom more firmly against the unyielding length of him. He angled his hips forward in response and she shivered.

The train lurched and immediately entered a tunnel. Darkness descended and Tia was blinded, unable to see her hand in front of her face.

The stranger gripped a handful of her thin braids and tugged her head backward to recapture her mouth. Using his foot, he nudged her feet apart. His tongue pressed into her mouth at the same moment he wrenched her panties aside and pressed two fingers deeply into her slick warmth.

On a strangled cry, her eyes rolled skyward and her head fell against his broad shoulder, her knees buckling beneath the onslaught of sensation. One arm held her steady as his palm patted her mound, his long fingers pushing in and out of her.

She moaned raggedly and the stranger swallowed it, grinding his pelvis against her behind. A hot knot of pleasure formed deep in her belly and coiled tighter and tighter.

The kiss deepened and she suckled his tongue,

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bringing it deep into her mouth to duel with hers. His hand increased its pace and she bucked against him, clutching and scratching his arm. Faster and faster his hand slapped her wet flesh as he ground against her, bringing her to the very edge of ecstasy.

Tia stiffened suddenly and her mouth fell open in a wordless cry. The hand around her waist flew up to cover it, effectively muffling her screams. Panting breaths gushed from her nose as wave after wave of spasms crashed over her and lights blazed from behind her tightly clenched eyelids. Only when the last tremor ebbed and she sagged against him did he pull his slick fingers from her body. Within seconds, the overhead lights flicked on and the car squealed to a halt, signaling her stop.

Still shaking and breathless, Tia bent to collect her forgotten bag. When she would have turned to face him, the stranger's arm tightened around her waist, stopping her. She opened her mouth to speak and he placed a finger over her lips, halting the words. His lips pressed against the thundering pulse at the base of her throat as, unbidden, his voice came to her mind.

Go straight home. Do not linger.

The doors opened.

Open your door for no one, Tia. No One. His lips left her skin.

Feeling strangely bereft, she focused on the strong line of his jaw.

Go now!

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The urgency in his voice propelled her forward. On unsteady legs, Tia pushed through the throng of people, pausing only once to glance over her shoulder. The stranger stood just inside the entrance of the car, watching her from behind the glass. His tongue flicked out to swirl around one finger, then up the other, licking them clean.

She spun and ran as fast as her legs could carry her.

Chapter Two

“You *What!*” Kelli screeched from where she sat perched on the edge of the bed.

“I know. Don’t say it!” Tia groaned, burying her heated face in a pillow and dragging it with her as she flopped onto her back. She could just imagine Kelli staring at her in bug-eyed, slack-jawed shock.

“I can’t believe you’re just now telling me this! It’s been what...two weeks? What kind of best friend are you?” Kelli scolded.

She ignored her. “It was like I couldn’t help myself. He just had this...”

“I can’t hear you. Your voice is all muffled.”

Tia snatched the pillow off of her face. “I said, I couldn’t help myself. He had this pull...this magnetism.”

“Soooo, basically, he was sexy as hell, you were horny, and stuff happened?”

She clicked her teeth together, narrowing her eyes at her friend’s candor. Truthfully, she was more irritated with herself than at Kelli.

“Well, happy day! It’s about time!” Kelli laughed gleefully.

She sat up. “Come again?”

“You heard me alright. I am so excited for you! I mean honestly, who has an encounter like that and the guy *not* be some skuzzy weirdo?” She plopped her upper body fully onto the bed, facing Tia. “When are you going to see this guy again?”

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Tia scooted back and leaned against the headboard, clutching the pillow to her chest and sighed dejectedly. "I'm not."

Kelli's forehead wrinkled. "And why not?"

"We parted ways before we could..." Her voice trailed off and she closed her eyes, expelling another frustrated breath.

"Oh, girl...that sucks."

"Hey. I figure, if it's meant to be, it's meant to be right?"

"Exactly," Kelli agreed.

Tia shook her head and focused on her friend. "So anyway, enough about me and my fairly nonexistent love life, have you heard anything about the job yet?"

Kelli poked out her lips. "I didn't get it. They did a background check and saw a couple of things I did in the past. After that, I got the old, "Don't call us, we'll call you routine."

"Awww, honey, I'm sorry. I know how much it meant to you," she said sincerely.

Kelli shrugged. "Tomorrow I'll fly home, regroup, and get my resume back out there. There's bound to be something better out there for me. I just need to search for it, right?"

"That's the spirit," she agreed, feeling awful for her friend. Kelli had had her hopes set on attaining the managerial position.

Kelli scooted off the bed and made to return to her room.

"Hey, Kel, wait," Tia called, coming to her feet

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as well. "Since it's your last night in town and you're not much of a clubber, what say we go to a movie? Afterwards, we can go to the *Cheesecake Factory*, eat something sinfully decadent, and pass out from sugar shock. How about it?"

"Only if I get to pick the movie," Kelli conceded with a small grin.

"Of course." She agreed, even knowing whatever her friend picked to watch would be extra gory and super terrifying.

"I've got *the* perfect movie; Blood Seek 2: Return to the Flesh. It *just* came out last weekend and I've been dying to see it. No pun intended."

"Great!" Tia said with false enthusiasm. *I won't be able to sleep for a week!*

* * * *

Tia pulled into the rear of the large parking lot around the corner from her apartment building, shifted into park, and grabbed two large training manuals from the passenger seat. They would be her study material for the next couple of days. Man, what a long weekend it was going to be! Monday, she would be tested over the procedures and she had yet to get her head into it. Every time she tried to study, she found herself thinking of mysterious green eyes and hair as black as a raven's wing, or of tanned fingers disappearing into her.... She felt a flush creep over her body again.

"This is ridiculous!" she mumbled, squirming in her seat. "Let it go, girl. You haven't seen him in weeks."

At least she didn't think she had, though several times, the sensation of being watched had skittered along her spine. Yet, she'd never seen anyone or anything out of the ordinary. Come to think of it, she'd been feeling that sensation off and on for months. Each time though, she chalked it up to an overactive imagination and continued on her way. Still....

She clicked her tongue and climbed out of the car. Who was she kidding? No one was watching her, least of all *him*. If anything, he'd skipped town shortly after their encounter. He probably had a wife or, at the very least, a serious girlfriend. She'd probably never see him again. She told herself it was for the best as she strolled toward the distant building. The sound of whispering brought her out of her musings. She looked back and forth but saw no one.

Stop it, Tia. You saw that stupid movie last week and you're still all jittery.

Nightmares had plagued her every night since she and Kelli had watched the horror flick. It puzzled her that the nightmare scenes she dreamed were not scenes from the movie. Instead of dreaming of B-movie creatures and regenerating flesh, she saw violent images of death and blood, so much blood she often awoke nauseous and shaking as if she were actually experiencing the scenes.

The whispering grew a little louder.

"Who's there?" she asked aloud even as she

realized what a ridiculously stupid question it was. Well, she wasn't sticking around to find out. She walked faster, telling herself she was being paranoid. Then the whispering sounded again, though not loud enough to understand what was being said. Tia chanced a glance over her shoulder and started.

Three individuals were shrouded in shadow about twenty yards behind her. There was something strange about them...something not quite right, yet...familiar. Her head whipped around to the front and she started speed walking.

Pretending to check her purse, she glanced over her shoulder once again. Their eyes glowed amber and flashed cat-like at her from the darkness. Her unease ballooned into full-fledged panic as the three dropped to all fours and came after her.

A scream burst from her throat as she dropped the manuals and broke into a hard sprint. As she turned the corner, she could see the front door of her apartment building. It was only about fifty feet away but it may as well have been in the next county. She knew she wasn't going to make it. Even now, the growls reaching her ears indicated those things were nearly upon her. Her chest constricted with terror but she forced her feet to pump faster in their impossible quest to reach safety.

She didn't know another presence had appeared behind her until a hand at her back pushed her to run even faster. Tia stumbled, barely

keeping her legs under her. Even so, a tiny ray of hope flared. Who was pushing her? Who cares; he, she, or it was helping her. She just might make it! She fumbled in her pocket for the card key that would gain her access to the front door.

Suddenly, the hands clamped around her waist and she was lifted off her feet and hurled, javelin-like, straight into the air. She screamed as her body flew past window after window until her flailing arms were finally able to grasp a railing. She hauled herself over it to land heavily onto a terrace.

Terrible yowling sounds vibrated the air around her. Shaking uncontrollably, Tia glanced down. She had to be at least five stories up! But how was that even possible?

On the ground, a large panther-like animal battled the three who had chased her. One by one they were propelled far from the building to land heavily upon and between parked cars. Each gained its feet and scampered away.

Tia swayed on her knees in disbelief then shrank back to avoid being seen. She curled into a ball against the corner of the terrace. *What the hell is going on and what are those things?*

She didn't know how long she lay there, trembling. Her mind had scarcely registered she was truly safe before a caped shadow landed on the railing, balancing above her. It dropped onto all fours near her feet and stared down at her from glittering green eyes.

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For one wild moment, Tia imagined it was the black jungle cat coming to devour her. Her eyes grew to the size of saucers when it gathered its hind legs beneath it and stood tall like a man. Her mouth dropped open but she couldn't scream. Terror had seared a path through her chest and up into her throat, cutting off her air supply.

The man/animal reached for her.

She fainted.

* * * *

The man knelt beside Tia's prone form and with one finger, pushed her braids from over her face. For a moment, he simply watched her. She was just as exquisite as he remembered. No, more so. His eyes traveled the length of her body.

Her toasted almond skin was smooth, clear, flawless and though she was not a petite woman, she boasted the kind of curvaceous body a man would kill to possess. He had known many women over the course of his long life but none had intrigued him as she had.

For weeks, he'd watched her from the shadows as she went about her daily life. He knew she spent most of her free time alone and she sometimes volunteered at a local pet hospital, even bottle feeding particularly small or sickly animals. He also knew that, with the exception of the necessary train rides, she shied away from crowds. In fact, she kept her distance from people, period. Given her past, he could certainly understand it, even if she didn't.

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Though she stirred, she remained asleep as he lifted her effortlessly into his arms. He strode through the open glass doors, bypassing the elevators in favor of the stairs.

Tia came awake with a start and realized she was being carried, rather quickly, up a stairwell. Instinctively, she looped her arms around the man's neck and studied his profile. A cleft chin came into her direct line of vision. Chancing a glance higher, she saw full lips, a patrician nose, and narrowed eyes...narrowed green eyes that glanced down at her. Oh Lord, it was *him*! She was in the arms of the man who had haunted her dreams and her waking hours for the better part of a month.

All at once, the night's events came crashing back to her mind, but so did something else. Flitting along the edges of her conscious mind was a memory her mind struggled to keep hidden to protect her. She tried just as hard to remember. Some inner feeling told her she just had to. So close...so close to...what? Flashes of faces and sounds of snarling raced through her mind. Then like a wisp of smoke it faded and was gone, once again sealed behind the protective wall of sub-consciousness and sanity.

The stranger stopped moving.

"Are you hurting?" he asked, staring at her.

She shook her head negatively and started wiggling in an effort to put her feet on the ground.

The man removed his foot from the last step and frowned.

“Put me down.”

He held her tighter.

“I said...”

“I heard what you said. The entire building heard what you said. What is your apartment number?”

“Ten twenty-one,” Tia answered before she thought better of it. *You don’t even know his name yet you’re telling him where you live? Real smart.*

He ran up two more flights, opened the stairwell door, and walked to her apartment. Setting her on her feet, he waited patiently while her trembling hands pulled her keys out of her pocket. She slid the key in the lock then spun around, pressing her back against the door. He stood so close she had to tilt her head to see his face.

“Who are you?” she asked, stifling the thrill of excitement racing through her as his eyes bore into hers.

The man stepped back, inclined his head, and bowed dramatically. “Dacien Hunt at your service. Be calmed, you need have no fear of me.” His slight Scottish burr washed over her, reminding her how much she loved the way he talked. *He could read the ingredients on a box of cereal and I’d still be turned on.* Tia cleared her throat when she realized the direction her thoughts were heading.

“Why were those...those...things after me?”

Dacien ignored the question, noting instead the way her entire body shook with delayed reaction.

He extended a hand to her. "Come, you need to rest."

"No, what I need is to have my question answered," she contradicted firmly, ignoring his outstretched hand and taking a step closer. "You were behind me...on the street?"

"Yes," he answered simply, lowering his arm.

"And I suppose you were on the terrace as well."

He nodded once, offering nothing further.

"I thought I saw..." She shook her head in exasperation. "What were you doing out there?"

He folded his arms. "I was saving you."

Tia twisted her lips to the side. "Thank you," she said sarcastically. "What I meant was..."

"You're safe," he interrupted quickly.

For reasons she could not begin to fathom, she believed him. In fact, the entire incident began to fade into obscurity in the back of her mind. She shook her head in confusion. It felt as if something nudged her mind, encouraging it to forget; but that was ridiculous.

"Go inside. Stay there and lock your door," he commanded suddenly.

"But—" Her breath caught when his finger slid across her lips. She resisted the urge to curl her tongue around it and turned her face away before she did just that.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"You have nothing more to fear but I must attend a business matter immediately. I will return

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to you.” His knuckles smoothed along her jaw and he was gone.

Tia watched him go; her face tingling with the heat his fingers created.

Go inside!

She shrieked and spun around. The words had popped into her head as clearly as if spoken aloud. She hastily obeyed, then locked the chain and the deadbolt behind her.

Sagging against the door, she covered her cheek where his fingers had been, then snatched her hand down in agitation. “This is crazy,” she mumbled, shaking her head at herself as she dropped her keys on a nearby table. “What just happened out there?” She headed to the bedroom to change as she thought it over.

What was it about him that made her grow hot, then cold, in the span of a second? It had to be more than physical attraction, even though his physical attributes were reason enough for any woman to lose her mind. Her fingers lingered over the last button of her blouse.

I will return to you.

“Dacien.” She spoke his name aloud on a sigh.
Dacien...

Little flutters stirred within her belly and her skin tingled. Would he come back tonight? What would she do if he did? She didn’t know a thing about him except his name but her body didn’t seem to be concerned over that one rather significant detail. She started pacing the confines

of her bedroom. Damn, she was practically twitching like a drug addict and all he'd done was touch her face! *Just imagine if he touched your... Oh, wait, he already has.*

"Cut it out!" she grumbled aloud as the heat of embarrassment snaked up her neck. No one had ever affected her this way before. It was damned disconcerting.

Tia rubbed the back of her neck agitatedly, then her arms as if she were cold. She plopped down on the couch and turned on the television, determined to think of anything but him. After several minutes, she flipped it off and tossed the remote to the end of the couch.

Out of the channels she'd surfed, all but one depicted couples in various stages of intimacy. *Arrgh!* She came to her feet and walked briskly to the bathroom, discarding clothing along the way in favor of a long cold soak.

* * * *

Shivering from her cool bath, she hastily donned a smiley face t-shirt and matching pants before climbing into bed.

She glanced at the bedside clock.

It read seven forty-seven. She never went to bed this early but couldn't think of any other way to get her mind off Dacien Hunt and the strange things she'd witnessed tonight that seemed even now more like a bad dream.

Twenty minutes passed before she drifted into a restless sleep. "Crap!" Tia complained, sitting

up, seconds later. “It’s hot.” She kicked off the covers and padded into the bathroom to hang up her slightly damp night clothes. She showered and toweled herself dry in record time. She walked naked to the thermostat, turned down the furnace, and went back to her bedroom to rummage through her drawer for something suitable to sleep in.

The last few weeks, the weather had been extremely fickle. Some days it reached high into the sixties, reflecting the Indian summer atmosphere. Other days the temperature dipped into the upper thirties, forcing her to turn on the furnace.

You’re hot from more than just the furnace.

Tia ignored the voice and pulled a long, burgundy-colored satin gown from the closet. She groaned aloud as the whisper soft fabric skimmed over her hypersensitive skin. *You want him, admit it.*

“Alright, I’m attracted to him. Nothing is going to come of it.” She winced at the involuntary Freudian slip.

Attracted? Girl, you can’t even talk straight. You’re about to combust!

She settled into bed and stared at the ceiling, then sat up, plumped the pillow, and flopped back onto it, forcing her eyes closed. Instantly, thoughts of Dacien invaded her mind. “Go to sleep. Just stop it and go to sleep.” She closed her eyes again and took several deep breaths to calm her racing heartbeat. Many long moments later, her strained

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mind began to relax and allowed her body to do the same.

Chapter Three

“Leave the woman alone. She remembers nothing.”

Andre looked upon Dacien from the raised dais on which he sat, surrounded by his followers. “I will not. The woman will be brought before us and destroyed. Then and only then will we cease to concern ourselves with her memory, or lack thereof.”

“No!” Dacien thundered.

“You forget yourself!” Andre roared back, coming to his feet.

The whispering of those gathered grew quiet as all attention focused on the escalating argument.

“For many years you and I have disagreed concerning the ‘activities’ of the group. In spite of this, I have never openly defied you, as you well know.”

Andre gave a brief nod of acknowledgement.

“I ask you now to trust me in this and know I will make certain the woman says nothing.”

“No, I will make certain the woman says nothing,” Andre assured.

Dacien’s lips pulled back from his teeth in a feral snarl, revealing pointed incisors. “Don’t do this,” he warned, his deep voice radiating his anger.

“Why such concern over this *mortal* woman?” Andre inquired, studying the other man with

interest.

Dacien's chin tilted as he straightened to his full six foot three inches. "She...is...*Mine*." Those three words, spoken softly, held such force that all but Andre shrank away.

Andre reclaimed his seat and steepled his fingers under his chin thoughtfully. He leveled his icy gaze on the younger man. "For too long, your way has not been our way. Now it comes to this. The woman is too dangerous to us. Because she lives, she threatens our very existence. So choose now. Are you with us, or against us?"

Dacien held the other man's stare for a full minute before turning his back in answer. "After today, I will not ask again," he said over his shoulder. "Do not come for her." He turned in a slow circle so all would hear and understand his words. "If you, any of you, attempt to harm her, you will face me." He strode from the room without a backward glance.

Andre shifted in his seat, hands clenching and unclenching, his mouth pinched in anger. "We shall see," he whispered. "We shall see."

* * * *

That night, Tia dreamed she walked through a mist-shrouded garden. The feather-light lavender gown she wore rose and fell softly around her as she moved amongst various hues of reds, purples, and blues. She smiled wistfully and cupped her hand around a particularly large violet bloom, then bent to inhale its scent. Strong masculine fingers

curled around her free hand.

She looked at the hand covering hers, then up into eyes darkened into deep forest green. “Dacien,” she murmured. With a gentle tug, he led her to a bed of flower petals and eased her onto it. He followed her down, bracing his weight on his forearms as the sweet fragrance rose all around them. He leaned to cover her mouth with his tenderly as his fingers caressed her cheekbones, her forehead, the soft curve of her chin. He coaxed her mouth open as one hand slid down the curve of her throat and covered her breast. His thumb and forefinger gently rolled her nipple through the thin fabric of her gown.

Tia moaned softly as wicked sensations shot through her. She reached to free the curtain of his hair from the simple tie binding it and buried her fingers in its richness as it fell around them.

Dacien shifted to lift her gown up and over her slightly bent knee and higher, past her hips. Tia pulled him back down to cover her. She tilted her pelvis and thrilled in the hard bulge pressing against her through the cloth of his pants. She lifted her face, kissing him with all the passion she possessed.

“I need you Dacien,” she murmured into the darkness of her bedroom. She didn’t open her eyes. She knew he wasn’t there. The garden was gone, the dream fast fading. On a sigh of disappointment, she turned onto her stomach and drifted back to sleep, holding onto what threads she could of the

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sensuous dream. Mere moments had passed when she felt a weight at her back and a tickling along the side of her throat. Then something oblong and solid pressed insistently against her bare bottom and her eyelids opened into a better reality.

* * * *

Dacien returned to Tia's apartment and rang the bell. He needed to talk to her. It was time for her to know what she was up against and who and what he really was. For the first time in hundreds of years, he was unsure of himself. What would he do if she rejected him; if after learning everything, she turned away in revulsion? The thought was nearly his undoing.

He rang the doorbell again.

No answer.

He knocked loudly and called out to her several times; still nothing. Concern propelled him through the nearby fire escape. He slipped out the window and eased his long body toward her terrace. It was an easy enough feat, as was unlocking the sliding glass doors to gain access to her home. When he stepped from the terrace into her bedroom, he wasn't prepared for the sight that greeted him.

Tia lay on her back with her long, nut brown legs bent and tilted to the side. Her gown was bunched around her waist, revealing the rounded globes of her backside to his hard, hungry stare. Her arms were thrown above her head and her lips were parted slightly. He thought she whispered his name but couldn't be sure.

“Dacien...” The word ended on a soft moan.

He stared at her with the passion of a man too long denied and need whipped through him with the force of a summer storm. He would have her tonight but not like this. No, she would be alert and more than certain when he took her. He leaned close and whispered her name.

She didn't respond.

“Tia,” he repeated, inching closer to brush her lips with his.

Without warning, she pressed her open mouth to his and kissed him deeply. Her hands fisted in his hair, and her arms held him almost desperately, as if terrified of letting go. Then, surprisingly, she released him, her arms falling harmlessly to her sides.

“I need you,” she moaned, turning onto her stomach. Her leg bent, displaying the glistening folds of her sex.

Dacien's heart beat a furious tempo, sending blood surging between his legs. He climbed onto the bed, taking care not to crush her as he eased his big body flush against hers and nuzzled the side of her neck.

The unfamiliar weight caused Tia to shift as she came fully awake. She tensed for no more than a breath before realizing it was Dacien who held her; his now-familiar scent enveloping her. The man was incredibly presumptuous but she couldn't summon the will to care. His lips were doing amazing things to her and all she wanted to do was enjoy it. She

turned her head so she could see his beautiful eyes, made darker with desire. "You're here."

He flipped her onto her back, gathered her in his arms, and kissed her breathless so as to wipe away all doubt. His lips were demanding, his kiss all consuming, leaving her with a yearning only he could appease. When he at last lifted his head, her body throbbed and they both breathed heavily. Holding her gaze, he bunched her gown in his fist and pulled it from her body. As the vision unfolded before him, his eyes darkened to liquid pools of emerald fire.

She grew nervous under his scrutiny. Licking her lips, she tugged at the sheets to cover herself.

"Don't...never again shield your beauty from me." He linked their fingers together and pressed her hands over her head. Maintaining eye contact, he sat back and unbuttoned his shirt, shrugging it from his broad shoulders.

Her mouth went dry from the sight of sculpted muscle.

Unable to resist, she slid her hands along the grooves and ridges of his abdominal muscles appreciatively. He was smooth and hard, like living marble. She watched in awe as his muscles clenched and quivered under her questing fingertips.

Dacien stilled to enjoy the soft pleasure she bestowed upon him.

She sat up and tilted her head back to watch his face as she unfastened first his belt, then his

pants, and pushed them down past his firm hips. She curled her fingers around his thick shaft as it sprang free and slid her hand up and down its length.

That's as far as he let her go.

He cupped the back of her head and slammed his mouth down on hers. His tongue plundered within mercilessly even as he pressed her back onto the bed to grind his hardness against her.

"Ohhhh..." Tia moaned, desperately trying to position her aching heat to receive him; her only thought to be filled by him.

He ignored her unspoken plea, deciding instead to take his time savoring her. The tip of his tongue outlined her mouth and along her jaw, ending at the shell of her ear to swirl inside.

Tia sighed softly as his lips pressed along the artery at her throat. Then nearly came undone as his mouth closed over one swollen breast, suckling it deeply. His tongue flicked the nipple over and over again. "Dacien!" She arched upward, gripping his shoulders.

He switched to her other breast, alternating his attention between first one and then the other dark, candy-coated nipple. Maneuvering his lean body lower, he anchored his hands at her waist and licked an invisible line to her belly button. His long tongue dipped within before he sat back to allow the coolness of the room to caress her body. "I can't get enough of you," he said hoarsely, as if holding onto his control by the barest of threads.

Tia viewed him through passion-glazed eyes, her body screaming with unfulfilled desire. She wanted...needed.... Then he slid his hands under her hips and used the flat of his tongue to stroke her center.

“Ohhhh!” She bucked against his mouth, arching from the bed as hard spasms rocked through her middle. She tried to move away from the overwhelming sensations but his grip was unyielding, holding her tightly to his mouth as he mercilessly sucked and flicked the small bud.

Their gazes clashed.

Dacien watched the myriad of emotions cross her face. Low animal-like growls of approval emanated from deep in his throat as he reveled in her response. She ground against him and he increased the pressure against her swollen flesh.

Tia shuddered and gasped, having no chance to come down from the first shattering climax before another was building. She lifted herself up on her elbows, eyes widening in incredulity.

His eyes narrowed with the wicked promise of more to come.

Her hands fisted in his hair, trying to pull him up. “No more...I can’t...” she panted. Before she knew what he was about, his long tongue slid deep inside her, curled, and thrust in and out. Tia screamed as her stomach muscles tightened again. Her eyes squeezed shut and her hair tossed wildly back and forth as liquid heat flowed from her again and again.

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He devoured her with animalistic fervor, taking all she had to give and demanding more. When she at last lay gasping, he grabbed her ankles and yanked her boneless body down before him. Holding her thighs open, he pushed the tip of his hardness inside her and waited. If she was going to turn from him, it must be now when he was most vulnerable, though the possibility of her rejection nearly killed him. His jaw clenched against the near unbearable pain.

“Open your eyes,” Dacien commanded more harshly than he had intended.

Tia’s heavy lidded eyes lifted and rounded as they met his.

In the darkness he appeared different, changed. Not drastically, but the change was there all the same. His cheekbones were more pronounced, his chin sharper, but most startling were his eyes, which were now slanted and glittering in the moonlight like a....

No, it’s impossible!

He resembled a very large...cat.

Chapter Four

In a blink, his features returned to normal, though the intensity radiating from his stare remained unchanged.

Tia frowned in confusion, her mind unable to comprehend what her eyes had seen. Surely what she had seen had been a trick of the light or of her mind. She couldn't have possibly seen what she thought she had. Apprehension passed over her but before she could give voice to her warring feelings, he lifted her hips and surged forward, entering her until he touched the mouth of her womb. The breath whooshed out of her body before she could even form a sound.

He was so large!

Breathing tightly, with barely restrained self-control, Dacien pressed his forehead to hers, giving her time to grow accustomed to his size. He studied her face intently. "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head negatively. Never had she been filled so completely, as if he truly touched every part of her, inside and out. Even now she could feel her body stretching to accommodate him. Her bowed back relaxed onto the bed as her hands passed over his angular features in wonder. He was so beautifully masculine her eyes clouded over. She pulled him down to her to fuse their mouths together, pouring every emotion she possessed into the act.

Dacien returned the kiss reverently, awed by her acceptance.

His lips hovered above hers as he slowly thrust in and out of her wet heat; grinding his teeth with the effort it cost him.

Tia opened her legs further as she moved against him, her breath hitching as pressure shot through her once again. She gasped against his mouth as he took his time, easing in and out of her with maddening slowness. He was driving her crazy. She dug her nails into his back and she lifted her hips against him, urging him to increase his pace but he denied her.

He laved the side of her neck, causing tiny goosebumps to rise with each sweep of his roughened tongue. She shifted restlessly beneath him and still he continued his slow assault. Her breath panted out of her lungs in short bursts as heat suffused her face and suddenly it was too much. She felt as if she were on the brink of something far beyond herself and was powerless to stop it. All at once Tia gripped him convulsively and cried out...a long primal urging that sank deep into his soul.

Dacien swelled inside her. He gripped her hips and pounded in and out of her.

Tia screamed and arched, shuddered and groaned, as wave after wave of orgasms crashed over her in the most powerful series of spasms she'd ever known. She mindlessly clawed and writhed beneath him but he was like a man

possessed. Each scratch spurred him onward. Every wild cry bursting from her throat called to him like a siren's song to his blood. His lips pulled back as his body slammed against hers, claiming her, branding her his. He threw back his head and roared, surging forward one last time.

The hot rush of his seed splashed within her and she stiffened again before going limp in his arms. He collapsed on top of her, his shadowed cheek resting against hers as they struggled to catch their breath.

Long moments later Dacien rolled over, tucking Tia's now sleeping form against him. Fierce protectiveness welled within him as her trusting hand slid up to rest high upon his bare chest. She settled against him more comfortably, lulled by the continuous purr-like rumbling vibrating against her cheek. He kissed her damp forehead, then tilted her chin up and pressed a kiss to her parted lips. She slept on, thoroughly exhausted.

Contentment such as he'd never known stole over him. On the heels of it, doubts troubled his mind. Would she accept him once she knew the entire truth? Or would she expel him from her life forever? He frowned ferociously as doubt after doubt tumbled through his mind.

"Are you all right?" she mumbled sleepily.

Dacien looked down at her as she reached to smooth the angry lines of his mouth. He nodded kissing her forehead. "I am fine...sleep."

Tia nodded tiredly and snuggled against the

curve of his neck, falling back to sleep in seconds.

He ruthlessly pushed his doubts aside. Regardless of what her reaction may be, he had to keep her safe until there was a resolution of the conflict between himself and Andre. He held her tightly, buried his face in her hair, and slept.

* * * *

It was still dark out when Tia's hoarse voice penetrated his brain.

"Who are you? Or maybe a better question would be what are you...really?"

Dacien opened his eyes to her questioning stare. Her full lips were reddened, her braids were twisted in various ways around her shoulders, and her sleep-spiked lashes rose and fell over less than alert eyes.

She was breathtaking.

"Tia." He reached for her.

"No, Dacien." She avoided his eyes and rolled away from him. Taking the cover with her, she came to her feet. "I have to know. I deserve to know everything." She directed her demand at his dimpled chin; an inner voice warned against looking into his eyes. She didn't act like herself when she looked into his green gaze.

He studied her actions intently. "You need not fear me. I will not force my will upon you. I never have."

In spite of her resolve her eyes clashed with his. "But that first night...on the train..." she stammered.

“...was exactly what you wanted,” he finished, his expression daring her to deny it.

Her face flamed but she lifted her chin. “Don’t change the subject.”

He sat up and began to dress, snatching on his clothes with jerky movements. She thought he meant to leave and knew a moment of near unreasonable panic until he at last faced her.

“Meet me on the roof in five minutes.” He stood and walked away.

* * * *

When she spotted him, he was standing on the ledge, surveying the city. His long hair lifted in the crisp breeze before settling to blend with the black coat he wore.

The view was spectacular. Amazingly tall buildings blinked with strategically placed lights that formed designs to commemorate the Christmas season. Mini Christmas trees flickered happily in various apartment windows, while decorated full-sized trees were proudly displayed in others.

Tia saw none of it as she crept toward the ledge and stood just behind Dacien. Her eyes and face burned from the winter wind, her heart raced in alarm, and the metallic taste of fear filled her mouth. As far back as she could remember she had feared heights. No, she didn’t fear heights; she was positively phobic about them. She didn’t even climb onto two rung step ladders and she only lived on the tenth floor because she had been in a

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crunch when she first moved and no lower level had been available.

Yet here she stood, in the freezing cold, on the ledge of her apartment building, with a man she hardly knew. This was madness! Still, for the answers she sought, she knew she would climb Mount Everest if she must.

Dacien had felt her approach, smelled the tang of her fear. She was trembling like a leaf in a windstorm. In spite of it, she moved to stand with him, and his admiration of her grew. Without a word, he extended his gloved hand back to her.

Tia didn't touch it.

Is this some sort of test? A lesson in trust? My God, isn't it enough that I'm here? Just tell me what I want to know!

She wanted to rail at him. Instead she gulped around the huge lump in her throat and placed her trembling hand in his. With a gentle tug, he pulled her forward to stand beside him. She gripped his hand like a lifeline, resisting for the barest of seconds before stepping tentatively onto the ledge. When she did, her heart slammed against her chest like a pinball and her breathing became shallow puffs of air.

She kept telling herself not to look down but she couldn't help it. She peered below her and instantly regretted it. The people were as tiny as ants, the cars like toys. A swift breeze swirled past and Tia couldn't prevent the small whimper that escaped her throat. *I've got to get out of*

here...just get away!

Dacien tilted his head. He appeared to be listening to something or for something; she didn't know which. His grip tightened, compelling her to focus on him and when she did, she was calmed.

"Do you trust me, Tia?"

"Yes." There was no hesitation even though there was no way to know if she could trust him and no reason she should. But she did. Somehow she knew he wouldn't let anything happen to her.

"Do you believe I will keep you safe?"

"Yes." She blinked, her eyebrows crushing together, wondering if her eyes were again deceiving her. *Both of his ears just flicked back and forth, like an animal's.* Unbidden, fresh memories of how his features had changed while they made love came to the forefront of her mind. *It can't be. It just can't!*

He inhaled deeply of the frosty air and prayed she would forgive him.

Before Tia could guess his intent, Dacien snatched her toward him and held her by her upper arms, feet dangling, directly in front of him. She was too scared to scream, too frightened to breathe. With infinite slowness, she tilted her head down. There was nothing between her and the pavement but air.

She nearly passed out.

Wide terrified eyes met his. "D-Dacien?"

"Trust me." The steel band of his arm crushed around her waist.

Instinctively, her arms and legs wrapped around him tightly as he dived over the side.

Tia did scream then, a wild piercing wail that became distorted as his free hand grabbed hold of an extended wire, jerking them in a different direction. Their momentum brought them up and around, much like a gymnast, before he let go and arched his lithe body forward toward another building. He landed using an outstretched pole as a springboard, and leapt an impossible distance to yet another building, then another. He repeated this two more times until his feet touched the railing of a balcony. Then he leapt upward, this time climbing higher and higher before landing softly on the largest terrace of the uppermost floor.

With great effort, Dacien pulled a stunned Tia's arms from around him and placed her on shaky legs, on the cool tiles. He reached to steady her when she would have fallen to her knees but she snatched away from him, stumbling in her efforts.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" she shrieked hysterically. Gaining her feet, she smacked him as hard as her strength would allow, falling to her knees in the process. She was beyond caring what his reaction would be. Near blind with delayed terror, she flew at him, pummeling his chest and arms in her fear.

He responded by wrapping his arms around her, pinning her arms to her sides and stroking her hair to calm her but Tia bucked against him wildly. "Let

go of me, you freaking lunatic!” He wouldn’t; he just held her until she collapsed against him, sobbing as she succumbed to the rioting emotions assailing her.

“Shhh, don’t cry. I had to.” He sighed. “Forgive me.”

Tia clung to him until his dark shirt was soaked with her tears and the terror had subsided. She opened her eyes to see he had carried her inside and stood cradling her against his body. She also realized that she clung to him like a vine. Releasing him self-consciously, she surveyed her surroundings, noting they were in an immaculate great room. The only mess, if it could be called that, was his discarded coat and gloves draped across the back of an elegant chaise.

Dacien placed Tia on a black leather sofa as if she were made of fine crystal and knelt in front of her. He appeared to be searching her features for something. When he was satisfied, he eased her coat from her shoulders and down her arms, tossing it onto the arm of the sofa.

Her spiky-lashed, reddened gaze fixed on his. “W-Why did you d-do that?” *God! I can’t stop shaking!*

“It could not be helped,” he said, rubbing his hands up and down her arms.

She jerked away from his soothing hands. “Explain.”

A muscle in his jaw ticked. Then he sighed. “When I had you meet me on the roof, my intention

was to tell you everything you desired to know.”

“You didn’t have to damn near kill me to do that. What aren’t you telling me?”

“After you came to the roof, I felt the presence of...others and they were getting closer. We had to move quickly. It was the only way.”

“Others?” Her eyes rounded. “You mean like the people...things...that were after me.” Her eyes darted around anxiously as if expecting them to appear at any moment. “But Dacien, surely we haven’t gone far enough. Maybe we should...”

“They won’t come here,” he interrupted.

“How can you be sure?”

“This is my home. No one would dare challenge me here.”

She nodded, eased by his confidence.

He smoothed several braids behind her ear and stood. Tia gripped his hand and stood as well, placing a gentle palm on his reddened cheek, genuine remorse etched across her features.

“I’m sorry I hit you. You were trying to protect me and I attacked you for it. Please forgive me.”

He gazed into her sorrowful eyes and was again touched by how deeply he cared for this woman. He covered her hand with his and brought it to his lips, pressing a kiss to her palm before pressing it against his heart. “If you were truly sorry, you would try to earn my forgiveness.”

Tia frowned until she saw the teasing lift of his sensuous mouth. She peered up at him through lowered lashes, her tongue gliding along her full

lips. "I can do that."

Clenching a fistful of his shirt, she wrapped an arm around his neck, anchored a leg high on his hip, and dragged his mouth down to hers. The hot, tongue-dueling kiss elicited a groan that rumbled from him through her. With a secret smile, she threaded her fingers into the hair at his nape and nibbled his lower lip.

Dacien trailed the tip of his tongue along her jaw while his thumbs pushed under her shirt to graze her sensitive nipples, causing her to tremble. His hands slid around her to grip her bottom, then lifted her to wrap her other leg around his waist. Kneeling upon the soft cushions of the sofa, he pressed his erection against her center, mimicking what he fully intended to do.

"Mmmmm..." Tia arched against him, wanting nothing more than to accommodate him. Unfortunately, her mind had other ideas. They hadn't resolved a thing. She allowed their play to go on a moment more before pressing a hand against his chest. "Wait, stop." She turned her face away breathlessly.

A warning rumble vibrated against her palm before he resumed nibbling the column of her throat.

"Ohhhh, that feels good." Her eyelids fluttered, so tempted was she to lose herself in what he offered. "No wait, stop." She pushed against his chest again. "We need to talk, please."

It took a moment for her insistent plea to

penetrate his brain. He pulled back and stared at her, appearing to wage an inner battle before removing himself from her.

Tia sat up, pressing her fingers against her swollen lips; her widened eyes followed him as he paced before her.

Dacien watched her like a predator stalking its prey. Long strands of his midnight hair swung in front of glittering eyes gone near black with unfulfilled lust. A wild, dangerous craving hovered between them and his nostrils flared, catching the intoxicating scent of her arousal. He stopped. His head tilted ever so slightly and he looked as if he would pounce if she so much as blinked at him.

Her inner muscles clenched.

Not this time. This time, you talk.

He seemed to realize when Tia had regained some control over her emotions. He forced himself to do the same before claiming the seat across from hers. Sighing heavily, he leaned forward.

“You seek answers. Very well. I’ll give them to you.”

Chapter Five

Tia settled against the plush cushions, wrapped her arms around her bent knees, and waited for him to begin.

Dacien steepled his fingers under his chin and leaned against the back of the chair, speaking in a deep, melodic voice. “I am one of a breed of feline beings, the *Shara Couma*. Those of my breed have the ability to shift at will from human to feline and back. When members of my species shift, we become a variation of the cheetahs, leopards, and panthers of the wild.” He ignored her sharp intake of breath. “Most of the *Shara*, as we now call ourselves, are born with a nearly immortal existence.”

“Nearly immortal? I don’t understand.”

“I say nearly immortal because there remains the possibility of death, whether by accident or by violent means. But if they’re careful with the life they’re given, they may live forever.” He paused but Tia nodded for him to continue. “The only exceptions are the Royals. Their lives are many. If they die by accident or are killed, they would arise again, thereby preserving the dynasty. However, if a Royal were to expend these lives say, with violent endeavors or frivolous risk-taking, he will weaken over time and eventually fade from existence forever.”

“How many of you are there?”

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“Once, there were thousands of the *Shara* scattered all over the world but as centuries passed, fear and ignorance drove humans to hunt us, depleting our number. Now only several hundred remain. Of those, only two are Royals,” he answered.

“So few.” Tia mused.

“Our falling numbers have become a source of great concern amongst us. To preserve the species, we breed only with other *Shara*. If conception occurs, our females give birth to anywhere from two to four cubs at a time.”

“Cubs? Your women give birth to animals?” Tia couldn’t mask her astonishment.

“Not in the way you are thinking. Our children are not born in feline form, but they do obtain the ability to shift during the toddler stage.”

“I understand, but if the women give birth to that many children...cubs, then there should be a lot more of you.”

“And there would be if all children who shift even partially during their toddler stage were able to return to human form. Many cannot because their fragile bones have not matured enough to handle such a violent transformation,” he explained patiently. “Over the ages, nature has decreed that only the strongest of those children may be guided back to human form. The weaker children become trapped in their semi-shifted state and die due to complications.”

Tia covered her mouth, her eyes mirroring her

heartache for the children who had suffered and died and for the parents who must live on, their dreams shattered.

“It was not always this way. At first we believed the deaths were the result of the monumental stress and fear experienced by expectant mothers, especially since it began after humans started to hunt us. But for reasons our doctors have yet to understand, many of our children continue to die. Some believe it is a curse brought upon us by the evil deeds of other feline shifters.”

Tia shook her head in denial but Dacien merely shrugged. “The few surviving children are privately schooled within our communities until they are old enough to be taught how to control their shifting abilities. After that, and only if they wish it, they are raised among human children.”

He pulled her hands away from her face. “In spite of the risks, it is a time of great celebration when cubs...children are born.”

“But if more of you die than are born...”

“Then our species would be lost,” he said, completing her thought. His expression turned inward as if weighing his next words. “There is a legend, passed down through the ages. It hints at the possibility of blending our DNA with that of humans, thereby increasing our chances of survival. But the price to be paid is high.”

“What is this price?”

Dacien remained silent for so long she thought

he wouldn't answer. "The sacrifice of one feline shifter's life is required if ever the decision were made to breed with humankind."

Her brow furrowed in confusion. "Does that mean one feline shifter has to die every time one of your breed and a human come together?"

"Not at all. The sacrifice is required only once but it must be a particular member of my breed. The shifter dies and the human is, in a way, reborn. Once the transformation is complete, the limitation is lifted and we may increase our number with whomever we choose, shifter or humankind. Still, the prospect of extinguishing one of our own, simply to test a theory, is not something we are willing to consider."

"You're certain someone has to die?"

He nodded. "So speaks the legend."

Tia inclined her head, her brow wrinkled in thought, appearing as if she had a tide of questions she wanted to ask. To her credit, she resisted, deciding instead to hear the rest of what he had to say.

"Most of the *Shara* are peaceful, living their lives among humans, as humans. And though it isn't necessary, some of us choose to work. We take jobs as doctors, lawyers, businessmen, even entertainers."

Tia shot him a look.

"We attained our wealth centuries ago so we are self-sufficient," he said, answering her unspoken question. "Now we merely trickle it out

to avoid suspicion of its origins.”

Whoa, wait a minute. He said centuries.

“How old are you, Dacien?” she asked hesitantly.

“Far older than you can ever imagine,” he answered cryptically. “There is a small group of *Shara* who choose to rebel against the peaceful co-existence between us and our human counterparts. They do not resist the wildness within and when the urge becomes great, they trap and kill humans in the way of our ancestors—the way beasts still do. This time of utter debauchery is celebrated by a feast of sorts, of flesh.”

“A flesh feast.” Her nut brown complexion paled as she imagined all manner of horrors.

“Over time the feast has become a yearly, night-long festival during which there is music, dancing, and revelry, beginning at sunset and continuing until sunrise. Only those who will participate in the unspeakable acts that occur during these hours are informed of the location.” His expression became one of tired irritation. “Their actions continue to make it hard for the rest of us to live silently within human society.”

“People are being killed, slaughtered. They have to be stopped.”

Dacien nodded in agreement. “Others have attempted to stop them and have met violent ends because of it.”

Tia shuddered and rubbed her hands up and down her arms.

“I am among the few who have the ear of Andre, their leader. His cooperation is essential especially because he is one of the two remaining Royals. I continually try to convince him to cease his attacks.” He raked his fingers through his hair and stood to pace the floor. “Thus far, I have been unsuccessful.”

Tia unclasped her hands from around her legs and lowered them until her feet were planted firmly on the floor. “Do you think he’ll ever listen?”

He didn’t answer but studied her as if waiting for something.

She couldn’t imagine why he was looking at her that way. “Dacien?”

He nodded at last. “He must. As each year passes, Andre grows weaker. He has lived for centuries but has spent too many lives on violent endeavors. Now he is in his last life. He must see reason before they are discovered. He has little choice.”

Tia sat back against the cushions when he offered nothing further. “If what you say is true, why are you here? What does any of this have to do with me?”

He stood slowly. “It is time you knew the truth.”

Her eyes followed him warily as he walked around the sofa to take a stance just behind her. He pressed his fingers against her temples and spoke in low tones as he massaged her skin. “Close your eyes. Relax your mind and body.”

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She obeyed, breathing deeply.

“Open your mind to me and remember,” he intoned as if from far away.

Dacien’s presence entered her mind.

Tia gasped and opened her eyes, attempting to pull away from him.

“Shhhh,” his hypnotic voice soothed as he held her firmly in place. “Settle...settle...”

She eased back against the cushions, her bones turning to jelly as he probed through layer after layer of her consciousness. The dam of emotion broke free, flooding her mind with sadness, trepidation, and terror as he breached the unknown depths of her mind. She fought the urge to resist as his fingers increased their pressure against her temples. Her breathing quickened and tears leaked from beneath her closed eyelids as suppressed memories became clear.

* * * *

State Street

One year earlier

Five dances in a row and Fernando, Tia’s dance partner, showed no signs of tiring. Quite the contrary, he appeared more energized with every dance. She, on the other hand, was breathing heavily and dripping with sweat. By song number six, Fernando took pity on her and pulled her to the side.

“Bonita, stay. I get you something cold to drink, yes?”

“Thanks,” she rasped. *God, I must look a mess!* She hobbled past Corey, who nibbled on the shoulder of a giggling, fuchsia-clad temptress. Continuing onward, she spotted Nakia; she stood talking eye-to-eye with a sandy-haired hunk, who appeared to hang on her every word. Lydia had long since disappeared but Tia wasn’t too concerned, considering the way she and her new friend had devoured each other on the dance floor. *Dirty Dancing* had nothing on those two.

She went in search of a restroom.

After encountering two filled bathrooms on the lower level, she made her way upstairs. Just when she was about to give up, she discovered the powder room at the end of the long hallway. She eased inside and plopped down onto the plush cushions of a sofa in the quiet room. The silence was strange; almost deafening, yet relaxing. She kicked off her shoes and bit her lips as a guttural groan of relief vibrated inside her mouth.

She wiggled her toes, then stood and freshened up as best as she could. She was glad she’d come, in spite of her earlier reservations. She’d have to remember to thank Jaden. Where was Jaden anyway? She shrugged her shoulders and finished her toilette, then pushed her protesting feet back into the suddenly too-small heels.

As she raised her hand to push the door open an eerie feeling passed over her. She tried to shake it off but it wouldn’t go away. Allowing her arm fall to her side, she backed away from the door until

her spine connected with the paper towel dispenser at the other end of the room.

“One of them came in here,” a voice hissed from the hallway.

Unreasonably frightened, Tia snatched off her shoes and leaped to her right, straight into a utility closet that reeked of bleach. She eased the door shut just as the bathroom door swung open.

“I don’t see anyone,” a woman’s voice purred.

“Check the ssstalls,” another voice lisped. “*He* will not be pleased if one essscapes.”

One by one stall doors were kicked open.

“What the hell is your problem?” a woman occupying the last stall screeched.

“Wait your damn turn!” *Grunt*. “What are you...?” *Grunt!* “Let go of me! HELP!”

Tia covered her mouth as the woman’s voice faded abruptly, following the sound of a sickening thud. She stiffened then as footsteps stopped outside the closet door. Her shaking hand gripped the doorknob tightly as the person on the other side tried to turn it.

“Come help me,” a strained voice rasped. “She’s heavier than she looks.”

A brief pause and the footsteps clicked away.

She sagged against a wall in relief. Still, she waited a full ten minutes before venturing from her hiding place. Shoes in hand, she listened for sounds on the other side of the restroom door. When all remained silent, she eased the door open and tiptoed out and down the hall, shivering with fear.

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Please, please don't let Lydia and the others leave me!

The blaring salsa music had stopped, replaced by unidentifiable noises floating up the stairs toward her. Tia eased closer to the railing and the sounds became clearer, louder. They were the sounds of crunching, and...*snarling*? On the heels of that startling realization came the knowledge that someone was having an argument. But who?

She dropped to her knees, gathered the extra fabric of her dress in her hands, and inched forward. Taking great care, she peered to her left through the hourglass-shaped bars. Two men, one wearing a navy dress shirt with matching slacks and the other wearing a hooded ankle-length leather coat, stood at the base of the long, winding staircase, arguing in hushed tones. She recognized the man in navy as the party host, Andre, but couldn't discern the other's features. Her gaze remained riveted on the two as she strained to hear.

"Andre," the man in leather implored, "you must not continue this madness."

"I grow weary of your continued interference," the other man intoned, boredom lacing his words.

"Then cease this! It's only a matter of time before you are discovered. If that occurs what would become of our kind?"

Andre turned to face the hooded man fully. "Lectures, always lectures; useless words, and ineffectual coercion. Don't you grow weary of it

year after year? Why not join our number? Become one with us.” His icy eyes became coercive his voice dipped low. “It tempts you doesn’t it? The smell...the hunger? Join us. Taste what you have missed.”

The man in leather turned angrily and stalked away.

Tia leaned closer, scooting forward until her face pressed against the bars. Her eyes remained fixed on the man’s retreating back until the dance floor came into full view. To her horror, the hall, which only moments earlier had been filled with music and laughter, was now awash with blood and body parts. More than a dozen cat-like creatures lay sprawled across bodies, some still twitching in the final throes of death.

Oh God!

Tia’s hands flew up to cover the gasp that nearly escaped her lips.

The creatures tore into flesh and bone with all of the fury of jungle cats gorging on a fresh kill. How could she not have heard the snarling of those creatures? Through the gore, she recognized one of Jaden’s blood-smeared sandals; Lydia’s violet gown was now in shreds.

She wrenched away from the scene below, violently forcing down the bile that threatened to spew from her mouth. When the spasms eased, she choked down a sob. Even knowing there was nothing she could do for her friends, she felt guilty that she lived, even if it was only for a short while

longer.

Lydia...Jaden... Where were the others? But she knew. They were dead. Murdered, just like Lydia and Jaden, their bodies strewn somewhere among the other victims of the slaughter.

I've got to get out of here!

There had to be a different way out than the lone door on the downstairs level.

With infinite slowness, she inched backward the way she'd come, her ears straining for any indication that she'd been seen. Tucking her lips between her teeth, she glanced between the bars and froze. The hooded man in leather stood on the far side of the room, watching her. She stared at him in mute terror. Fear of discovery nearly made her ill again. In her heart, she believed there would be no escape. He would alert the others and she would be torn to pieces.

For breath-stealing seconds their eyes remained locked on each other. Why didn't he call out? She *knew* he saw her. Why didn't he come after her?

Go! Get away as fast as you can! Startled, her eyes searched his face. He nodded imperceptibly, granting her a chance to escape.

Tia backed away faster. When her toes touched the wall, she turned around on hands and knees, stood cautiously, then flew down the hall, searching frantically for a door or a window, anything through which she could escape.

* * * *

On the lower level, a female lifted her head from her feast, ears twitching. At almost the same instant, several others did the same. In his altered state, Andre stood on his hind legs and sniffed the air. A new scent hung low in the room; the scent of fear, *living* fear.

His eyes flashed. His pointed teeth gleamed with saliva in anticipation of the kill. His muscles bunched to spring toward the staircase.

"This one is mine," the man in leather said gruffly as his body began to shift, his clothing disappearing even as he dropped to all fours. "It has been too long since I've tasted the hunt."

"I knew you couldn't resist much longer," Andre said smugly. "It's in your blood."

But the man didn't hear him. He was already bounding up the stairs.

* * * *

Tia ran down the long hallway, vainly twisting locked doorknobs as she went. She tried the last door and sobbed with relief as it swung open.

Something clinked behind her and she whirled in the doorway, gripping the frame and doorknob tightly. A large, dark animal leaped toward her, its yellow eyes glittering in the shadows. She loosed a bloodcurdling scream and slammed the door shut before it could reach her. Backing away into the semi-darkened room, she turned, then stumbled over a stack of empty boxes.

The room was huge and filled with desks, chairs, and other office equipment. Tia

maneuvered around obstacle after obstacle, then cut to the right and hurried toward a row of windows.

The door burst open and bounced off the wall; the creaking of the hinge, a haunting sound in the death silent room.

Tia dove to the floor, quelling the urge to cry out when her side connected sharply with the leg of an office chair. She eased off of the hard plastic just as the door clicked shut. On hands and knees, she crawled quietly, picking her way across the floor.

A light flicked on, bathing the room in brilliant white, and she stopped cold behind a large file cabinet, waiting.

"You may come out now. I won't hurt you," a deep voice coerced from a distance away.

Moving soundlessly, she crouched lower and inched away from the melodic sound.

"Don't be afraid."

Tia stopped, trembling violently. With agonizing slowness, she turned her widened eyes toward the voice above her. The leather-clad man crouched above her, elbows on knees, on top of the cabinet. He appeared completely at ease, balancing on the balls of his feet as if he did so all the time. He jumped down, landing behind her, and stood slowly to his imposing height. His jade eyes gleamed within the hood covering his head.

Tia flipped around onto her backside and crab-crawled away from him. He followed, his stride

slow and deliberate, yet determined. "I will not hurt you," he repeated, purposefully enunciating each word as if it would help.

"Like hell you won't!" Tia tucked her feet beneath her and sprang toward the room's row of windows. She reached the first one and tugged. It opened easily and she wasted no time scrambling through it. She pressed herself against the building and balanced on the ledge, but she made the mistake of looking down. Terror paralyzed her, rooting her to the spot. She didn't know if she was more afraid of falling or of the grisly fate that awaited her inside.

"Come back inside. Let me help you," the man cajoled mere inches from her face.

She quickly shimmied several feet to the side before panic set in again.

The man extended a hand toward her. "There is no use in running. You won't make it ten feet from this building unless you let me help you."

"You stay the hell away from me!" she shouted, inching her way down the wall. She dug her toes into grooves and balanced on outstretched bricks. Her fingers strained and her nails broke with the effort it took to hold herself flush against the wall.

She lowered herself as quickly as she could but it wasn't fast enough.

The glass blew out of the row of windows above her and she cried out as paws and arms with elongated claws reached for her, scraping along her

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skin in their effort to seize her. Instinct made her wrench away. She lost her tenuous hold on the wall and plummeted to the pavement below.

Chapter Six

Tia's eyes flew open, her mouth dropping in a soundless scream as she relived the horror. Blood roared through her head and her eyes rolled back as she hyperventilated. Dacien scrambled onto the sofa and pushed her head between her knees. She fought him but he held her there, coaxing her with soft words and caresses to slow her breathing.

After long moments she stopped fighting him and was able to calm herself enough to breathe evenly.

"I'm fine now. Let me up." Her muffled voice brooked no argument. When he released her, she straightened and covered her eyes and nose with her hands, trembling, as she tried to come to terms with all she had seen. "What happened next?"

Dacien sat on the arm of the sofa. "You were lucky. The fall wasn't as bad as it could have been but you did sustain a concussion and a couple of cracked ribs. A few days later you slipped into a coma and remained so for over six months."

"I was told they found me on a gurney in the emergency room," she said vacantly. "It was you. You put me in there, didn't you?"

"You would have died if I hadn't." He took a deep breath and his gaze intensified, as if willing her to understand. "I also am responsible for the coma you were in."

"What?"

“Had I not incapacitated you in that way, Andre would have sent others to kill you the second you were alone. Whether you believe it or not, the coma saved your life. Had you gone home, you would have been hunted down. As it stood, I was able to convince Andre that you were not a threat.”

She considered that.

“I’ve been keeping watch over you since the moment you awakened, hoping that you would remember nothing.”

“Why?” she couldn’t help but ask. “Why did you protect me?”

Dacien stared at her as if the answer should be obvious. “You’re an amazing, intelligent, and beautiful woman. But it was your will to survive that earned you the right to live past that night, Tia. I became your protector to ensure that you would.” He stood, pulling her to her feet as well and ran his thumbs along the line of her jaw before his arms settled around her waist. “But more than that, I wanted to know *you*, to experience your strength, your spirit, for myself. I’ve been with you since long before that night on the train.”

She pressed her forehead against his chest, inhaling his familiar scent. “All this time, I felt someone there, watching me but I thought, I dunno, I thought I was losing it.”

“No, sweet, you weren’t ‘losing it’, as you say. You merely gained a shadow,” he teased as her head tilted back, revealing a lifted eyebrow.

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She watched his eyes darken as she licked her slightly parted lips. He ducked his head to taste them, his finger keeping her chin tilted, as if he feared she would turn aside.

Tia leaned into him more with each pull of his lips upon hers. Yet after a moment she stepped away, plopping back down on the sofa as if deflated. Leaning over, she clasped her hands between her knees to still their trembling from painful memories coupled with the effect of his kiss. She fought to regain some control. "This is a lot to take in."

Dacien moved to kneel directly in front of her, but she continued to study her tightly clenched hands as the images of her friends, the horrors she'd faced, and her uncertain future dominated her thoughts.

"The police never found the bodies. Not even...pieces. It was like nothing had ever happened there." She closed her eyes, shaking her head to clear it. "The detectives questioned me over and over again but I couldn't remember anything beyond getting out of the car."

Dacien studied her bent head for several seconds before crooking a finger under her chin to lift her luminous gaze to his. Two fat tears leaked from her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. He smoothed them away with his thumbs and caressed the sides of her face.

Tia gripped his hands. "That was you at the party, arguing with Andre." It sounded like an

accusation. "What were you doing there?"

Dacien held her stare for a moment before reclaiming his place on the edge of the chair, facing her. "As soon as I learned of the festival, I went to put a stop to it but I was already too late." There was no emotion in his tone, only resignation and calm acceptance.

She eased to the edge of the sofa toward him. "Why would you go there alone? I mean, what if they'd turned on you?"

"I was in no danger. I cannot be harmed."

A chill snaked down her spine. "Why can't you be harmed?"

His large hands engulfed hers. "I was never in any danger because I alone can speak with Andre as equals. His minions would not dare engage me. We are the remaining Royals of the *Shara Couma*. Andre is my brother."

Tia gaped at him open-mouthed, unable to hide her shock. "That murderer...that...*monster* is your *brother*?"

He nodded.

"Then you must be..."

"A monster as well?" he finished for her.

"I didn't say that."

"But you were thinking it," he chided without malice. "No, my love. I am...different from you perhaps and I have done things in the distant past I'm not proud of but I am neither monster nor murderer."

My love... She pushed the endearment aside.

She wasn't prepared to handle what it implied. "If that's the case, then what *are* you?"

"I am merely a man who is trying to live in peace among my people and our human counterparts."

Tia sat forward hopefully. "That's what I want, to live in peace. Dacien, you can talk to him; you've said so yourself. Tell him...tell him I've left town or that I don't remember anything."

His eyes bore into her. "Andre's interest in you lies in what you know and he is willing to do anything necessary to find out what that is. The only reason his followers are not coming for you now is because they are aware that you are here with me." His raised palm halted the question before she could ask it. "They believe you will expose their *activities*."

Her palms slapped her thighs in anger. "Activities? Dacien! They're murderers...cold blooded killers...the whole lot of them! They killed my friends and would have killed me!"

"I understand that," he responded in his calm way.

"Even so, there's no reason for them to be so worried about me. I couldn't possibly give a good description of what any of those cat creatures look like as humans," she protested, splaying her arms wide. "Besides, who would believe a story like mine without having me hauled away to the nut farm?" Tia let her arms drop. "I'm not a threat."

"I understand that as well, but Andre is not

willing to take that chance. He wants you 'handled.'

Her ebony skin drained of color.

His eyes followed her as she eased away from him toward the far end of the couch, stood, and then moved to stand behind it as if it could protect her.

She eyed him apprehensively. "How do I know you aren't here for the same reason?"

"If I were, you would already be dead."

Tia searched his face. His open expression said he wouldn't hurt her and she believed him. She had to. There was no other choice. She closed her eyes and hung her head, releasing a pent up breath. Her mind was a jumbled mass of fearful thoughts and questions and she struggled to make sense of it all. More snatches of memory came together and she stifled a whimper, shivering with renewed fear.

Dacien startled her by sliding his arms around her and holding her close. She hadn't even heard him leave the chair. Still, she couldn't help being glad he did and she buried her face in his chest, clinging to him, yet hating the feeling of helplessness even as she did so.

"What am I going to do?" she sniffed.

The vulnerability in her voice touched a part of him he'd believed long dead. He was at once reminded of another from long ago and his arms tightened around her. He would *not* fail his woman; he could not. With a firm, yet gentle grip, he lifted her chin, forcing her to meet his steady stare.

“You will not be harmed. So long as you are with me, you are safe.”

Surprise lit her features. “But how can you....”

His unwavering stare silenced her question. “I vow to protect you, always.”

“How can you possibly keep such a vow? What do you plan to do?”

“Do not concern yourself with that. Just know I have promised to keep you safe, and I will do so, but you must heed my words and do exactly as I say.”

“All right.” Tia nodded. “Tell me.”

“Until this thing is over, you are not to leave this dwelling between the hours of sunset and sunrise,” he instructed. “After sunrise, go nowhere unless I am with you and go nowhere alone...ever.”

“Wait a minute; how long are we talking here?”

“As long as it takes to ensure your safety.”

Tia frowned. “What about my job? If I can only leave with you, how am I going to work?”

“You won’t. You will take a leave of absence until this thing is settled.”

She shook her head and moved a step away from him. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Well, for starters, I haven’t been at my job long enough to take a leave of absence. If I were to take leave now it may become permanent.”

Dacien shrugged. “So be it. I am more than capable of taking care of you.”

Her hands flew to her hips in affront. “Oh, just

like that huh? A few words from you, and I give up my career? I don't think so, buddy."

One dark eyebrow lifted in surprise. He opened his mouth to make her see reason but Tia's glare stilled whatever he'd planned to say.

"How easy it must be for you to make such a demand. Judging by your expensive taste, I'd wager you've never worked a day in your entire privileged life." She gestured at the lavishly furnished penthouse.

His lips thinned but he made no move to correct her and that made her even angrier.

"For your information, I've worked hard to get where I am at this stage of my life and regardless of my feelings, I will not jeopardize my career for a...a *fling*!

Dacien's expression turned to stone in the span of a heartbeat. "A fling? Is that your view of me? Of us?"

Tia walked away, unable to face the heat burning in his eyes. She paused to wipe an imaginary speck of dust from the ornately carved dining table. "Us? What us, Dacien? We hardly even know each oth..." She broke off suddenly as Dacien gripped her upper arm and spun her around.

The fury in his eyes could melt steel.

She made no move to pull away; simply tucked her lower lip into her mouth as her eyes met his.

Dacien pulled her forward until a whisper separated their mouths. "There is no us?"

Tia shook her head.

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He maneuvered her until her back touched the cool stone wall near the fireplace then planted his hands on either side of her. "And we have no future?"

"None."

"Wrong." His mouth slanted across hers.

Tia inhaled deeply through her nose and wrapped her arms around his neck as his tongue explored her mouth. He kissed her until her lips were bruised and her body throbbed for him. But even as she strained against him, he set her aside and took a step backward. She reached for him, feeling strangely bereft when his lips left hers and the circle of his arms dropped away, but he moved even further away.

"Say it." The intensity in his gaze wouldn't allow her to turn aside.

She blinked, knowing exactly what Dacien demanded to hear. But how could she say the words when she couldn't even admit to herself that they shared more than mere intimacy? On a strangled sound of regret, Tia fled to the relative safety of the guest room, locking the door behind her.

* * * *

The next several weeks passed without incident and life returned to a semblance of normalcy. Dacien had not only relented when it came to her job, but it was his limousine that brought her to and from work each day. The only stipulation was that she could only arrive and leave with him. They

even spent lunch hours together.

Accustomed to being independent, Tia thought she would go crazy being watched so closely, but she soon found she enjoyed every moment they spent together. Conversations with Dacien were anything but boring. In the evenings they discussed everything from weather to politics. They were of similar minds on some issues, debated heatedly on others, and agreed to disagree with the rest.

Dacien enjoyed Tia's company immensely. Some nights, after a particularly interesting debate, he would find her rearranging furniture, pictures, and sculptures—a sure sign she was upset. In between debates, he regaled her with tales of Queen Anne Stuart's court as well as the debauchery in King Louis XV's, and when it came to games and trivia she was more than a match for him. If there was something she didn't know, she was an eager student with many questions and ideas. Her insight often left him thinking long after the conversations ended.

As time passed, he arranged to have many of her belongings gathered from her apartment and moved to his. He claimed to have done so only because of the immediate threat. Tia had made a fuss, but in the end he had his way. In return, he indulged her as she added personal feminine touches to various living areas of his home, making it theirs. He couldn't have been more content, for Tia brought such light into his dark life that he was loath to even consider the possibility that

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eventually it must end.

Chapter Seven

Tia sat cross-legged behind the massive cherry wood desk, chewing on a pencil, deep in thought. She stood abruptly to straighten her burgundy skirt so it would fall well past the top of her knee-high black boots before settling into the chair again. In spite of her best efforts to keep it smooth and straight, the skirt rose to the top of the boots again. She had no idea why it bothered her so or why she was so fidgety, she just was.

“Miss Matthews, you have a call on line one,” the childlike voice of Kiana, the college intern, called through the intercom.

“Thank you. Send it through.” She waited several seconds before picking up. “This is Tia.”

“Tia! Oh I’m so glad I caught you!”

Her brow wrinkled. “Kelli? Are you ok? You sound strange.”

“I have a cold,” Kelli said hurriedly. “Listen, I haven’t been in town long and I was about to head back out, but I need a huge favor.”

“Sure, what is it?”

“My *Blackberry*...I left it in your apartment. I thought I could handle things here without it but there is some information in it that I need to get...like today.”

“Ok.” Tia glanced at the clock. It read four-fifteen. “If you have to have it now, have Craig, the building super, let you in. I won’t be getting

out of here until five. After that, I still couldn't possibly make it before six."

"Actually, I already tried Craig. He isn't in. I really need to get my *Blackberry* and take the quickest flight back out. Normally I wouldn't ask but..."

She thought of Dacien. "Kell, I can't."

Kelli sighed. "I'm in trouble T...major trouble. If I'm not back with that information by early tomorrow morning, I'm going to be indicted!"

Tia jumped to her feet. "Indicted! Just what are you mixed up in?"

"I can't tell you any more than I already have. Just help me, please. I'm desperate!" There were tears in her voice.

"Oh Lord, girl. You stay put. I'm on my way." She disconnected, then rang the front desk.

"Kiana, if Mr. Hunt comes in, tell him I had to meet Kelli at my place."

"Yes, Miss Matthews."

She grabbed her coat and purse and started to call Dacien as she ran from the office into the waiting elevator. The call dropped just as his greeting came on.

"Oh, hell!" she muttered, flipping the phone shut and flashing an apologetic smile at the elderly gentleman who occupied the elevator with her. He exited on the next level, after which the doors closed in slow motion, in spite of her persistent pressure on the ground floor button.

Unable to be still, Tia paced the confines of the

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small glass box as it made its lengthy decent down the remaining sixteen floors. She had once dreaded this twice-a-day ride, squeezing her eyes shut and breathing deeply until it was over. Now she stared unblinkingly out the glass, her mind in turmoil, silently willing the car to move faster. Her brows crunched together. What was going on with Kelli?

Growing up, it seemed that her friend couldn't go more than a few days without getting into one kind of trouble or another. Several years ago, however, Kelli had made up her mind to turn her life around and she never looked back. This latest problem gave her pause. Had Kelli's past come back to haunt her? Whatever had happened, Tia was determined to help out in any way she could. The elevator doors opened and she ran out the front of the building, arms waving wildly at an oncoming cab.

* * * *

"She's gone?" Dacien braced his palms on the receptionist's desk and leaned forward. "Tell me where she went and how long she's been gone."

Kiana's mind went blank as she clenched the papers in her hands to still their trembling. The man before her hadn't shouted, but his words rocketed through her as if he had. As Dacien Hunt glared down at her, she nervously tried to recall what she'd been told. "I...I don't..."

His expression turned fierce.

"Wait, I wrote it down," she stammered, fumbling around the desk. "Oh! Here it is." Kiana

held up the lime green sticky note triumphantly. “She went home to meet Kelli. She left more than thirty minutes ago.”

“Damn!” he thundered, storming away. Knowing the dangers she could face, what could she have been told to make her defy him? And why hadn’t she called? He ducked into the fire exit, streaking down the stairs far faster than the elevator could have moved.

Winston, his driver, was waiting outside and stood holding the door. Dacien climbed inside and dialed Tia’s cell as the car pulled away from the curb. Almost immediately, her voicemail picked up. He left a quick message then tried her apartment. Apprehension tripled when he received the same results.

Something was very wrong. He could feel it. He stared hard at the phone as if it contained the answers he sought. Then, before his disbelieving eyes, a missed call message flashed three times before going still. He knew who it was from before he even checked and although it was only just appearing, the call had been placed a half hour earlier. He slammed the phone shut and clenched it in his tight fist. Abruptly, he leaned forward and tapped the glass.

As if reading his thoughts, Winston cut a sharp left to head in the direction of Tia’s apartment.

* * * *

Tia stepped out of the elevator glancing up and down the long hallway.

“Kelli?” Pulling her scarf from around her neck, she hurried to her apartment, only to be brought up short when she spied the partially opened door. Instantly on guard, her eyes darted back and forth as she backed away. She’d gone no more than a few feet when the sound of someone moaning in pain reached her ears. Heart hammering, she fumbled in her purse for her phone and quickly dialed 911, whispering her information into the receiver. The dispatcher asked question after question until the moaning sounded again. She eased the phone back into her purse, making sure to leave it on.

Please let them get here soon!

She swallowed harshly and eased forward. Every instinct that screamed at her to run for her life warred with the equally strong pull to help her best friend. Setting her jaw, she retrieved a tiny canister of mace and the small stunner Dacien had given her from the side pocket of her purse. She inched the door open, holding a weapon in each hand. Her alert eyes constantly scanned the room as she moved deeper into the apartment. A soft sigh from behind made her spin around so fast that she stumbled. There, laying face down on the floor near the bedroom, was Kelli.

“Oh no!” Kneeling, she returned the mace to her pocket and turned Kelli over, smoothing her sandy blond hair out of her face. Kelli’s eyes were closed and a trickle of blood flowed from a gash in her temple.

Tia tapped her on the cheek. "Kell, can you hear me?"

Kelli's response was incoherent.

"Come on." Tia grunted against the other woman's weight. "We've got to get out of here."

"So good of you to join us...little sister," a sultry voice that sounded eerily familiar said from behind. Icy dread leaked down her spine. As she turned, a blinding pain exploded against the side of her skull and the world went black.

* * * *

Dacien crossed the threshold of Tia's apartment and stopped cold. The dwelling reeked with the stink of evil. *They* had been here and now they had Tia, of that he was certain. Fear of what they may have already done to her crashed upon him.

Don't even think it.

If she were hurt or worse he would know. He would feel it. For now, Tia was alive and she needed him. He would not fail her. He could not!

He turned to go as the sound of blaring sirens nearly burst his eardrums. At the same time, a woman he recognized from pictures as Tia's friend, Kelli, staggered from the direction of the bathroom, holding a bloodied towel against her head. Dacien caught her as she collapsed. He placed her on the nearby couch, anxiously sitting next to her.

"She sounded like...like me..." Kelli slurred. "Tia."

“Go on, Master Hunt, I will see to her,” Winston said, moving to take his place.

Dacien nodded with gratitude. “Make sure she is taken care of. Spare no expense,” he instructed already at the door. “You know where I’ll be.”

With blinding speed, he flew from the apartment and burst through the tenth floor window. He knew where to go now, knew what the outcome must be.

It was long overdue.

* * * *

Tia came awake with a start and groaned in agony. Her head throbbed but she couldn’t even attempt to ease the pain. Her arms and legs were splayed wide and tied in a way that held her immobile on the floor. Suddenly, everything came back to her in a flash and she struggled weakly against her bonds.

“Sleeping beauty has arisen,” a woman’s husky voice taunted from her left.

Gingerly, she turned her head and was blinded by the light shining behind the approaching female. The woman sat down beside her and folded her long, olive-toned legs to the side. Tia tried to focus on her facial features but found the task difficult.

“What happened to Kelli?”

“Kelli? Ahh, yess...the friend you were so desperate to save.” The woman’s voice dropped. “Tell me, how did I do?” In a perfect imitation of Kelli’s voice she said, “*Tia, I left my Blackberry in your apartment. Help me, please!*”

Tia stiffened in surprise, blinking rapidly, until the woman's sardonic expression became clear. "Lydia!"

"It is me, Teeta."

"It can't be. I saw...they killed you."

Lydia laughed heartily as if privy to some tremendous joke. "I suppose my altered state would have been a bit...misleading." Grabbing a fistful of braids, Lydia yanked Tia's head from the floor, her smile transforming into an ugly sneer as her features distorted.

"You don't get it, do you?" She leaned so close that her lips brushed the shell of Tia's ear. "I sent the announcement of our little...festival to Jaden's e-mail. Look around, Teeta," she demanded, turning Tia's head back and forth. "Recognize anything?"

Tia's pulse pounded and her eyes rounded in horror. "Dear God." She was back where the nightmare had begun.

"What a loyal friend you are. But if I were you, I'd be more worried about myself right now," Lydia sneered.

"Now, sweet, be kind to our guest," Andre said, approaching from the shadows. "We've waited so long for her to join us."

Lydia released the other woman's hair so abruptly that her head thudded against the floor, causing her to groan. She stood and sauntered toward Andre. As she passed, he swatted her behind soundly for disobeying him. Unfazed, she

purred loudly before draping herself upon the stairs among the dozen onlookers.

Nauseous with pain and fear, Tia alternately prayed and railed at herself for leaving the office in spite of Dacien's warnings. Outwardly, she looked at the observers with contempt before leveling a hate-filled glare on Andre as he squatted beside her.

He absently fingered the shock of white hair at his temple. His ice blue eyes were cold and hard as he studied her and his full lips had a decidedly cruel twist to them.

Tia jerked away as he reached to graze her cheek.

Admiration filtered into his thoughtful expression. "I see why he wants you; fire and ice wrapped in a beautiful package."

One corner of his mouth lifted in amusement as her eyes flickered to the door. "Dacien won't make it in time to save you, though he will no doubt try."

Sickening popping sounds caught Tia's attention and she watched in horrified fascination as all of the onlookers except Lydia shifted into cat creatures and slinked forward to form a large semi-circle around her. Backing away, Andre inclined his head in farewell. A cheetah was the first to crouch low in preparation to spring upon her. The others followed suit.

Her heart plummeted and she squeezed her eyes shut against the inevitable, fighting tears.

Dacien, I need you...

Untamed: Dacien and Tia

* * * *

I am here...

A sudden heaviness on her stomach forced the air from her body in a whoosh. Her eyes flew open and collided with those of the dead cheetah lying across her, a large blade protruding from its throat. Even in death, its gaping maw remained poised at her throat and she shuddered.

The rest happened in a blur. One minute she was bound and certain to be torn to pieces, and the next, she was cut loose and stood pressed tightly to Dacien's back.

Keeping himself between Tia and the cat creatures, he stepped around the one he'd killed and moved toward the front door, away from the snarling group.

She gripped the back of his trench coat and cast surreptitious glances over her shoulder.

The creatures followed at a distance.

"Brother!" Andre shouted. "You stand against your breed in favor of the human woman!"

Dacien's jaw went tight with disdain. "You are *not* of my breed!" he bellowed in return. "The man I once called brother is dead!"

Andre's face flushed scarlet with rage. "Then perhaps you should join him." His attention shifted to his followers. "Kill him."

A shocked cry arose from among the beasts. Never had such an order been issued; one Royal demanding the death of another? It was unheard of...unthinkable. They hesitated, lifting their

gleaming eyes to where their leader stood above them.

Andre said not a word but merely stood, waiting for his orders to be carried out.

Several of the creatures advanced toward the retreating couple, but the rest shifted into their human form, unwilling to commit this most horrendous of atrocities. At a nod from Andre, those who had shifted were attacked by the others in a vicious fight to the death.

In the confusion, Dacien grabbed Tia by the hand and pulled her out the door and into a downpour. They ran for nearly a mile, not knowing whether or not they were being followed. Suddenly a car materialized out of nowhere, blocking their path. Dacien pushed Tia behind him and unsheathed a wickedly curved dagger.

“Master Hunt,” Winston called out. “You’ve picked a frightful night for a jaunt through the city.”

They lunged into the backseat as the car sped away.

Once he was satisfied they weren’t being followed, Dacien returned the dagger to its sheath within the lining of his coat and turned to Tia. Steady rivulets of rainwater dripped from her braids and ran down her back and arms. She appeared not to notice, staring sightlessly out of the window, her tears mixing with the dampness already on her face.

His eyes bore into her but she didn’t so much

as glance his way. Growing concerned, he cupped her face in his large hands.

“Tia, look at me. Come on, sweetheart.”

Her luminous eyes met his as if seeing him for the first time and she smoothed a hand over his handsome face; a face she thought she would never see again. “You came for me,” she whispered, pressing her lips to his.

He settled her across his lap as he kissed her deeply. His long fingers gripped the back of her head as his tongue dueled with hers.

When she at last broke the kiss, her lips were bruised and tingling, their breathing rasped loudly in the quiet car, and the evidence of his desire lay heavily against her thigh.

She rested her head in the curve of Dacien’s shoulder and inhaled his intoxicating scent; a mixture of rain and cologne and man. She closed her eyes and snuggled into his warmth.

He held her close as his thoughts turned to the scene he had burst in upon. Tia tied helplessly to the floor. Fernando, in his altered state lunging for her exposed throat...

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I didn’t wait for you,” Tia whispered, breaking into his thoughts.

“Don’t think about it now. You’re safe. That is my only concern.”

She stiffened suddenly. “Kelli! I forgot...”

“She’ll be fine, Miss,” Winston assured from the front of the limo. “Her injury has been attended to and she is resting comfortably in Mount

Salenas Hospital.”

“Thank God.” She sniffed and scooted back onto the leather cushions, wiping her eyes dry. “I would like to see her, if I could.”

Dacien slid an arm behind her and tucked her comfortably against his side. “We’re going home. Once this is ended, you may visit her in person.”

She didn’t argue. “How did they get her, Winston? Do you know?”

“She claimed to have flown in to attend to a business matter. She was on her way to the airport when she detoured to grab her gadget from your apartment. When she got there, Lydia was waiting.”

The car pulled to a stop alongside the curb.

Dacien and Tia exited quickly and hurried to the elevators that would take them straight to his penthouse.

He opened the door and ushered her inside.

As she stepped over the threshold, she walked directly to the sofa, plopping onto the overstuffed cushions. When Dacien joined her, she guided him until his head rested across her legs, then massaged his scalp, sifting her fingers gently through the thick strands.

“They won’t stop until they kill me.”

He didn’t respond.

“They could be on their way even now, right?”

“Yes.” He saw no need to keep the reality of what was to come from her. “Though I don’t believe they’ll come in here. More likely, Andre

will call me out for the right to decide your fate.”

Her eyes fell. “I’m scared.”

Dacien gripped the back of her head and pulled her down to press a hard quick kiss to her lips, but didn’t release her as she expected. “I will not allow anything to happen to you. This ends tonight.”

“I know.” She swallowed around the knot of worry lodged in her throat, chewing her lower lip to keep from speaking aloud her feelings for him. Instead, she contented herself with spending this time quietly until he had to leave her. She knew he would give his life for her, but she didn’t want that. Her eyes misted just thinking about all the things that could go wrong.

Dacien sat up, noting her attempt to be strong for him. He didn’t know whether to be touched by her concern or insulted by her lack of faith in his abilities. Instead, he reached to soothe her.

Crash!

Dacien shielded Tia with his body as shards of glass from the terrace doors showered around them.

His head snapped around, as the man in the doorframe stepped forward.

“Hello, brother....”

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Chapter Eight

Dacien fell to the ground as Andre launched himself against him. The two men grappled fiercely, rolling over and over and slamming into the front door even as Lydia advanced on Tia.

“Come to me, Teeta,” Lydia taunted. “Make it easy on yourself.”

“Come get me, bitch!” she taunted back, scrambling backward over glass as Lydia stepped onto the couch and leapt toward her. A well placed kick and Lydia grunted, doubling over and clutching her stomach.

Tia stood and plucked several painful shards of glass from her palms as the other woman righted herself. On a hiss of fury, Lydia charged her, catching Tia by the hair and pulling her down to the floor. Tia swung wildly as the crazed woman sat on her stomach, clawing and hitting her. Digging her heels into the floor, Tia lifted her pelvis and twisted violently to the side, effectively dislodging Lydia. Bleeding from a cut near her eye, Tia scrambled to her feet, wiping away the blood before it could blind her.

The sound of splintering wood reached her ears.

Dacien...

Lydia charged her again but this time she was ready, catching the woman with a left hook to the face and a straight punch in the nose. The

resounding crack nearly sickened her. Lydia screamed in pained surprise, lashing out with nails bared to leave long, bloodied gashes down Tia's arms. She moved toward Lydia again and was blinded by Dacien's coat as Lydia threw it over her face.

In the next instant, Lydia kicked her in the leg and shoved her past the empty frame of the terrace door, causing her to stumble. She landed on her back heavily, wincing as the rounded handle of Dacien's knife dug into her spine. She pulled the coat from her face in time to see Lydia shift into her puma form, bare her fangs, and lunge.

Screaming, Tia pulled the knife from within the folds of the coat and lifted it at the same moment Lydia landed on top of her. The big cat didn't make a sound as its life drained from its body.

Warm, slick blood coated Tia's hands and arms but she was too shaken to do more than scramble from under the dead weight of the animal. She collapsed on her side, gasping and coughing as cold rain pelted her, washing away the angry red from her skin.

In the next moment, a faded scuffling sound seized her attention. She gathered her feet beneath her and staggered through the destroyed room and out the splintered front door. She raced to the stairwell and glanced over the side. There was no sign of either man. Then she heard a thump above her.

The roof!

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* * * *

Tia pushed open the rooftop door and raced out into the downpour. “Dacien? Dacien!” She searched all over but couldn’t find him anywhere. A movement to her side caught her attention. She hurried to the edge of the roof and squinted through the steady downpour. On another roof, far across from where she stood, Dacien and Andre fought fiercely.

The men were evenly matched and though Dacien stood several inches taller than his brother, Andre was broader. She wanted to call out but she dared not distract him, having no doubt that Andre would kill him if given even the slightest advantage.

* * * *

Dacien knelt over his brother, pummeling him with his fists as cold rainwater sloshed all around them. Andre gripped Dacien’s dark shirt and pulled him closer before rolling them both over and over, punching him in the ribs as they went. He tried to position them near a loose wire that sizzled as rain splattered onto it but Dacien, sensing his intent, wedged his knee between their bodies and flipped his brother over his head. Andre landed hard and panted to breathe. As Dacien approached, Andre swooped his legs. He fell to the ground, hitting his head on an exposed pipe in the process.

All became silent save for the steady patter of rain upon the ground around him. Stunned, Dacien lifted onto an elbow, cupping his palm against the

bloodied back of his head. He glanced up and grew still. Several feet away Andre crouched on all fours, facing him, his bones shifting into feline curvature. Spotted orange/brown fur grew out of his skin and also ringed his hauntingly clear, yellow eyes. He released an inhuman roar as razor-like claws burst from his fisted knuckles.

Before his brother could pounce, Dacien rolled to his feet and leapt away; his body shifting as he lit upon a slant in the rooftop and sprung from it. He landed on all fours before Andre, baring fangs that grew to lethal points.

Tia clapped her hands over her mouth.

In his panther form, Dacien was longer and taller than his brother, though Andre, in his leopard form, was broader. He bellowed a warning to Andre that froze the blood in her veins.

The leopard roared an answering challenge.

The combatants circled one another, each attempting to gauge the other's weakness. The leopard reared up on hind legs, snarling in fury. The panther merely stalked back and forth, growling deep in his chest, his attention never straying from his enemy.

Tia had seen enough. She had to do...something. She didn't bother gauging the distance between the two roofs. Instead, she turned and hurried back the way she'd come, running inside and down the stairs as if it were an Olympic event. Four flights down, she heard the ding of an elevator and burst through the fire exit

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to race down the hallway toward it. Reaching the elevator just before it closed, she pressed and held the down button, making it to the ground floor in record time.

She flew across the wide street, slipping and nearly getting run over twice in the process, and slammed her shoulder against the revolving door before darting across the hotel lobby toward the elevator. As it sped upward, she doubled over, trying to catch her breath. *Oh God, please let him be ok, please. I'll do anything. Just don't let him get hurt.* As the doors opened, she surged forward and down the hall leading to the roof exit. She reached for the doorknob and turned.

Locked!

Choking down panic, she frantically searched for something with which to force the door open. Precious seconds passed before she found the emergency extinguisher, along with an ax, ensconced safely behind a glass door. Pulling off her shoe, she broke the glass, grabbed the ax, and started chopping at the doorknob.

* * * *

The big cats flew at each other, colliding in mid-air before landing in a ferocious tangle of teeth and claws. The panther roared as the leopard sank its yellow fangs into his shoulder. Horrendous howling and screeching ensued as they rolled over and over, each trying to gain the advantage. Using his powerful hind legs, the panther shoved the leopard away, propelling the other animal some

twenty feet. The leopard scrambled to its feet and bounded toward the glowing eyes of his brother. It lunged with jaw open and claws drawn.

The panther jumped to the side at the last possible moment then turned, lifted a paw, and swiped deep gouges into the leopard's exposed side. The animal howled in pain and skittered off into the shadows.

The black cat followed. He turned a corner and was blinded by a wet handful of sand-like grit. Andre came forward as the panther tried to clear its eyes. He began kicking the animal in the side and head as hard as he could. Each kick he delivered sent the animal closer to the edge of the roof.

"DIE!" Andre screamed maniacally. "Die so I can be rid of you once and for all!"

Gripping the panther's tail, Andre dragged him to the edge of the roof, then pushed his hindquarters over the side. His eyes gleamed with satisfaction as the rest of his brother's body began to go over the edge as well.

The last paw slipped and long, tanned fingers burst from the knuckles to grip the ledge a millisecond before he would have plunged to his death. The other hand joined the first as he struggled to pull himself up. Undeterred, Andre peered over the edge.

"Even you wouldn't survive a fall from this height, brother," he sneered. "Had you left me to do what was needed, the woman's death would

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have been quick, painless. But now you will die knowing she will suffer unimaginable horrors at my hands before I grant her the mercy of death.”

Dacien, bellowed with hate and rage. One hand slipped, grasping at the air wildly before curling around a thick, outstretched piece of iron.

* * * *

Tia opened the door and crept cautiously onto the roof. All was still, save for the soft splash of raindrops. The loud popping of an electrical current startled her and she clamped a hand over her mouth to muffle the startled gasp that escaped her. Another pop and a sizzling sound, and the air grew still once again. The silence magnified her anxiety by leaps and bounds, but then she heard a voice and eased toward it.

Andre stood near the edge of the roof, looking down triumphantly.

Tia drew closer and her heart seized.

Dacien was struggling to hold on and one hand was slipping.

Shaking uncontrollably, she lifted the ax and tiptoed toward Andre.

* * * *

Andre squatted down beside Dacien to whisper, “Just know, I will grant your woman *my* pleasure before I tear her to pieces.”

He stepped hard on Dacien’s fingers.

Dacien gritted his teeth against the pain and pulled the heavy piece of iron from the crumbling concrete. With unimaginable strength, born of

sheer willpower, he hoisted himself up one-handed and sent the jagged iron straight through Andre's other foot.

Andre yowled in pain and turned aside, narrowly avoiding the ax swinging at his head.

"Get away from him!" Tia cried, swinging again and again, backing Andre farther away from his brother.

With great effort, Dacien hauled the rest of his body up over the slick ledge and onto the roof.

Andre's lip curled back from his teeth as he leaped toward her. Panicked, Tia swung again, cutting away a chunk of his shoulder. He screamed as he clutched the wound and caught her by the throat, dragging her to the ground. Now crazed with agony and rage, he flipped her over and pushed her face into a puddle, holding her there.

She fought like a thing possessed, swinging and kicking in a fight for her life but she was no match for the man's superior strength. Just as her movements began to slow, Dacien was there, wrapping his arm around Andre's throat and hauling him back and away from her.

Tia came up sputtering, wiping her eyes as she struggled to her feet.

Andre pulled the iron from his foot and was attempting to plunge it backward into Dacien. Tia dove at the pair, grabbing Andre around the legs and knocking them all off balance.

Dacien lost his grip as Tia's momentum propelled her and Andre backward. As they fell to

the ground, Andre's flailing hand caught and pulled the loose electrical wire. Loud popping and showers of sparks flew as electric shock surged through Tia and Andre's convulsing bodies. A flash of unnatural light surrounded the two and dimmed.

Within seconds, they both lay still.

"No!" Dacien screamed as he raced, slipping and sliding, to where the two had fallen. He tugged off his shoe and moved the wire as quickly as he could, then shoved Andre's lifeless form aside before gathering Tia in his arms.

"Oh God, baby, no! Say something. Talk to me. *Please!*" He listened to her chest.

Nothing...

He gave her mouth to mouth resuscitation and chest compressions, tirelessly working to bring her back, begging God, the fates, and all the powers in between for her life.

But it was no use.

She was gone.

Her head lolled to the side even as he cradled her. Dacien lifted her hand to rub against his cheek but it slipped from his grasp, falling limply to the rooftop. Grief crashed upon him, stronger than anything he had ever felt. His roar of denial shook the rooftop as it echoed throughout the city. It was the mournful cry of a broken soul and those who heard it were moved to heartache, scattering toward shelter to be with loved ones.

Dacien wept openly, bitterly, his harsh, choking sobs blending with the thunder crashing all around;

his tears melded with the rain as it continued to soak him.

He pressed a kiss against Tia's cooling lips and rocked her back and forth, crying her name aloud over and over until his voice left him. Even then he called her. An indeterminate amount of time passed, and still he held her. When at last he lifted his face from the curve of her shoulder, the rain had stopped, the sun was shining, and the roof was dry. He squeezed his eyes shut against the offending light, so bright and cheerful on this, the worst moment of his existence.

Cradling Tia close, he moved to stand, his steps heavy as lead as he walked toward the open door.

"Dacien..."

He froze, afraid to move, certain his mind had conjured the whisper-soft voice.

She shivered violently in his arms. "S-s...so c-cold..."

His eyes flew to Tia's face and he nearly dropped her. She appeared confused and a bit dazed, but very much alive.

Impossible!

Dacien plopped onto his backside in disbelief, gaping at her as if she would disappear if he so much as glanced away. They stared into each other's eyes, both wondering at the question they saw there, for there was no way to make sense of what had happened.

And suddenly he knew. "The legend..."

"It's true," she finished, twisting to look in the

direction where she and Andre had fallen.

Andre's body was gone. Not even a trace of him remained. He had simply faded away.

Her palm cupped Dacien's cheek lovingly.

She lives! The realization was more than he could take in. He felt like laughing, crying, and shouting all at once. Instead, his mouth crashed upon hers, pouring every emotion he possessed into the act. His arms tightened around her and he swore he would never let her go.

"Dacien, you're crushing me," Tia gasped against his mouth.

"I love you."

Tia tugged on his hair, pulling him away to study his face. "Say that again."

He settled her more securely in his lap. "I love you, Tia. I should have told you every day before now, but I swear I'll spend the rest of my existence proving it to you." He pressed his forehead against hers in an attempt to rein in his emotions. It was a fruitless effort, for tears of gratitude streamed freely from his eyes. "Don't ever scare me like that again. *Ever*. I couldn't bear it." He shuddered and hugged her again.

"I'll try not to," she murmured against his neck. "I love you, too, Dacien, more than you will ever know."

Cradling her close, he stood and carried her from the roof and into their future.

Epilogue

Hunt Estate

Three years later

“Dacien!”

He glanced up from watching his two-year-old twin son and daughter wrestling to see Tia hurry from a side door, lean low, then leap a staggering distance toward him. He met her halfway and curled his arms around her waist, his eyes searching her face with concern. “Are you alright? What is wrong?”

She laughed happily and graced him with a lingering kiss. “Ya know, I’ll never get tired of this cat thing. I love it. And to think, we’ll be together for centuries. Boggles the mind, doesn’t it?”

“Tia...” he warned, swatting her bottom playfully.

“Ok, ok, I’ve got some news. Are you ready?” she teased, wiggling her eyebrows. It was then he saw that she was hiding something behind her back.

Emerald eyes twinkling, he stepped back and held out his palm.

She placed a thin, odd-shaped stick in his hand. “You’re going to be a father...again.”

His face lit up as he crushed her to him. Mindful of her condition, he immediately loosened his grip, yet stepped in close to capture her lips in

a mind-numbing kiss until she swayed dizzily.

“I love you,” he murmured when he lifted his head.

“And I love you. You don’t mind having more?” she asked, leaning back slightly, the first hint of uncertainty creeping across her face.

“No, baby, I’ll take all that you can stand to give,” he affirmed, cupping his hands around her bottom and pressing against her.

“Now see? That’s how I keep ending up in this condition,” she teased, feeling more content than ever. Sliding her arms around her husband, she stood on tiptoe and traced his ear with the tip of her tongue.

He shuddered in response.

“Charlene!” His deep voice boomed across the yard.

Tia’s mother appeared in the door of the great room. One look at her son-in-law and goo goo-eyed daughter and she rolled her eyes in mock disgust. “Say no more. I’ll look after my grandbabies.” She shook her head and turned to her husband as the couple disappeared into the tree line toward the private lake. “I wouldn’t be at all surprised if we were coming to visit another one this time next year and maybe again the next.”

Jonathan Matthews merely shook his head and continued reading his paper.

About the Author

Naomi James lives in the Midwest with her family and two monster dogs. In addition to reading and writing, she enjoys singing, swimming, playing volleyball, and spending time with friends.

Her love of romances spans some twenty years when, as a teen, she'd spend countless hours perusing an aunt's vast collection of romance novels.

She has now been writing seriously for just over three years and is a member of the writer group, Romance in Creative Hues (R.I.C.H.). When not writing the latest scene for one of her many works in progress, Naomi can be found online doing research or updating her blog, at www.naomijames.blogspot.com

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