



*Winter Wishes*

Vivi Andrews  
Vivian Arend  
Moira Rogers





## Winter Wishes

### A Twist on Tradition

A woman has the Christmas Eve from Hell. Two cat shifters play naughty games. And a witch brings out the beast inside the man. The magic of the season takes on a whole new meaning in these three fantastic--and festive--novellas from some of the best voices in paranormal romance.

Anthology includes:

*Tangled Tinsel* by Vivian Arend

*No Angel* by Vivi Andrews

*Freeze Line* by Moira Rogers

Stories also available for purchase separately.



Dear Reader,

There's something magical about the holiday season, whether you celebrate Christmas or Kwanzaa, Hanukkah or Diwali. The energy and excitement surrounding these holidays charges the air and our emotions, providing a perfect platform for romance and love. So I knew we couldn't let Carina Press's first holiday season pass without celebrating it with a collection of special novella releases.

This holiday season, celebrate with our first collection of invitation-only novellas. We've pulled together eleven talented authors and author duos, all of whom have made their mark in their respective niches, and invited them to transport our readers with holiday delights. In *Naughty and Nice*, join Jaci Burton, Lauren Dane, Megan Hart and Shannon Stacey as they show you both the sensual and sweet sides of the holidays. Visit post-apocalyptic worlds and paranormal beings in an enchanted journey with authors Vivi Andrews, Moira Rogers and Vivian Arend in *Winter Wishes*. And celebrate the beauty of the season in *His for the Holidays* with m/m authors Josh Lanyon, Z.A. Maxfield, Harper Fox and LB Gregg.

Through the talent of their writing and their captivating storytelling, I believe you'll find something in each of these special novellas to put you in the magic of the holiday moment.

Wishing you the happiest of holiday seasons.

~Angela

Executive Editor, Carina Press

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# Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Tangled Tinsel: Vivian Arend](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[About the Author](#)

[No Angel: Vivi Andrews](#)

[Chapter One: Cloudy with a Chance of Angels](#)

[Chapter Two: Mistletoe & Mephistopheles](#)



[Chapter Three: How to Cope When Your Boyfriend is Abducted by the Prince of Darkness](#)

[Chapter Four: Waking the Dead](#)

[Chapter Five: The Blurry Lines Between Heaven, Hell & Hollywood](#)

[Chapter Six: No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service](#)

[Chapter Seven: So You're Dating a Demon](#)

[Chapter Eight: When the Hordes of Hell Attack](#)

[Chapter Nine: Hell Hath No Fury Like Satan's Mistress](#)

[Chapter Ten: Truths & Consequences](#)

[Chapter Eleven: Angels We Have Heard in Hollywood](#)

[Chapter Twelve: Dawn of the Damned](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: Mistletoe Merry-Go-Round](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Freeze Line: Moira Rogers](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[About the Author](#)





## **Tangled Tinsel** **By Vivian Arend**

***She's the cat's meow, and he's ready to pounce!***

Five miles of leather-clad leg is all it takes to lure Kyle Branegan out from his carefully hidden lifestyle as part of the Cougar Corp, a secret branch of the Shifter Enforcer League. He's hoping for a night of fun and frolic, cat-style, no strings attached. With a sultry swing of her hips, Eloise Scott tangles him up in her ball of tricks, and just when he thinks he's about to get lucky, she cuffs him--naked--to her bed.

An undercover cop in the human police force, El's been given a top-secret mission to keep the big cat under her paw until he's needed to testify in court in the New Year. Her decision to take him home for a quiet Christmas in her sleepy hometown turns out to be far more interesting than she expected. Her parents are suddenly rich, her old boyfriend is sniffing around and all six-feet-plus of sexy cougar male is sleeping in her bed.

And that's before they announce their fake engagement...



## **Dedication**

For my Mom, who was totally thrilled when I told her I was writing a book for a division of Harlequin. But sorry, Mom, you're still not allowed to read it. I promise to write something less spicy...someday.



## Chapter One

Five miles of leg strutted past him. Leather clad legs with incredibly high boots that wrapped lovingly around her thighs, leaving a scant three inches of bare skin visible below the bottom of her fuck-me leather miniskirt.

He'd died and gone to heaven.

And when she paused and bent over, exposing a tantalizing slice of two perfectly rounded ass cheeks, he lost control and purred in public.

The human females at the next table looked up from their frothy mugs of frou-frou coffee to gawk at him in concern. Kyle Branegan returned their stares with a smile, wagging his brows until one looked away and the other woman--well, she licked her lips and swallowed hard. *Yeah toots, you were flirting with a cat before.* Kyle wiped his mouth, threw the napkin down and unfolded his legs from under the teeny table.

Hunting time.

His target had disappeared around the corner, but Kyle didn't feel any need to hurry. The full sun shone down, fresh morning air filling his lungs as he strode in pursuit. There weren't many people out yet, the pre-Christmas rush nowhere near as frantic as it would be in a few weeks. Black Friday was over and he'd finally found a few clues he needed to progress in his investigation. He deserved a day off. He deserved a little fun, and the woman--or should he



say, the pretty kitty--he now trailed? She deserved a bit of fun too.

One corner after another Kyle followed the delicate scent of the other cougar shifter. He hadn't seen another of his kind in the area for months, and a female? *Rawr*. He could hardly wait. They might be territorial--a carryover from their animal natures--but the human twist in their bodies meant they had mastered the art of sharing space. Sort of. At least temporarily.

He spotted her in the distance, weaving through the growing crowds as she entered the shopping district of the city. Her head stuck out above the others, the red highlights in her thick auburn hair glinting in the sunlight. A quick mental assessment put her just shy of six feet with that lovely hair that hung past her shoulders. The flickering glimpses of the rest of the package were enough to make his mouth water, and he hurried his pace. Yeah, it had been a long time since he'd had another cougar in his bed, and while the human women he'd been with lately were fun, there was something so much better about sex with a fellow shifter. He wouldn't have to temper his strength. Behind his jeans, his cock lined up a little too intimately with the teeth of his zipper. Yup, he was hard. Rock solid in fact.

She ducked into a shop and he grinned as he glanced at the signage. Naughty Lingerie. Hmm...*hunting and* entertainment. The day was looking better and better all the time.

A small bell tinkled his arrival as he opened the door,

careful to leave the etched glass intact. Fruity scents overwhelmed him, filling his head with a sickly perfume. He sneezed involuntarily.

"Good morning, sir." A clerk slithered up to him, blinking her eyes rapidly, her breasts bulging from the top of her squeezed hourglass torso. "May I help you with anything? Anything at all?"

She laid a hand on his forearm, the light touch tickling him. His thick hair stood upright as she smoothed her fingertips down his arm. Hmm, she was obviously a shifter fan--the type that liked to get it on with guys that could turn furry. Usually that would be a fabulous thing to discover. While people were, on the whole, cool about shifters since the revealing had happened a decade ago, there were a few issues that still arose. At times the pro-shifters were almost as bad as the anti-animal camp.

Yeah, he liked to be petted, but not by her, at least not now. "A woman came in a moment ago. Where is she?"

Disappointment washed over her features for a second before she schooled herself and gestured into the shop. "A friend of yours?"

The sweet smell of cougar filtered through the air. "Yes."

It wasn't a lie. She would be. Cats being cats and all, he figured they were only a small step away from being very *intimate* friends. Kyle strode forward toward the change room area.

The store clerk hovered at his back as he surveyed the wall. Tall individual compartments greeted him. One

cracked open a slit and an arm shot out, wisps of fabric hanging from her manicured fingertips. "Can you find me one of these in a size up, please?"

Kyle grinned as he wordlessly took the garment and passed it back to the clerk. Through the open slit he caught a brief glimpse of honey-brown skin, lots of honey-brown skin, and a happy rumble started in his belly.

Lots of *naked* honey-brown skin that he planned on getting to know very thoroughly, very soon. He turned and followed the clerk to the main shop.

"We don't have that style in a larger size in the same color." The clerk slid her admiring gaze over him, ignoring the rack in front of her as she sighed, eyeing him up and down. "Does your friend have another preference?"

Red. The image of red silk on his mystery woman's skin increased the pressure in his groin. He pointed and when the clerk pulled the garment from the rack he accepted it with a smile. "I'll take it from here."

The sighs rising behind him as he made his way back into the change area made him grin. Oh yeah, there was something in the shifter psyche that loved the admiration of the chicks, but right now he wanted to be getting hot and sweaty. It was time to howl. He knocked lightly on the dressing room door and it swung open, the hand shooting out again.

He ignored it and stepped in, closing the door behind him.

She raised one perfectly arched brow, her fists moving

to rest on her hips. Then he wasn't too sure what kind of expression she wore, because to be honest, he wasn't looking at her face. He'd already ventured farther down the body. Honey-brown skin, *oh yeah*, tapered waist, nicely flared hips. The tiny scrap of fabric covering her mound didn't hide the scent of her sex, light and yet mesmerizing in the confining quarters.

Strong limbs. Oh damn, he loved a woman with thigh muscles. It made it so much more pleasurable when she wrapped her legs around him and held on tight as he plunged into her again and again--

A light cough forced him to reluctantly drag his gaze up to her face.

She wore a smirk. This had oh-so-much potential.

"You lost, sweetheart?" Pure vocal sex. Her voice curled around his senses, licking into his ears as if she'd lapped with her tongue. Wet heat thrilled down his spine and his pants grew another size too small. Damn, if he kept her talking he would come without a single touch.

Kyle held out the soft red silk and she laughed. "You give all your customers this kind of personalized attention?"

Their fingers brushed as she gathered the material to her, and electric passion sizzled along his arm, over his shoulder, wrapped around his throat and yanked him forward. He crowded her toward the far wall of the change room. She never took her gaze from his, not as she paced backward. Not when the heat between them increased as the space between them decreased.

Not when he eliminated the air between them completely and sealed her to the wall with his body.

Hot flesh burned through the fabric of his clothes and he regretted not taking the time to strip before joining her in the room. It would have made it so easy to reach down, drag his elbow under her knee, open her up and drive his aching cock into the welcoming of her sex--

She purred, and something along his spine melted, pooling what little remained of his brains in the heavy weight of his balls.

"I've never had room service like this. What's your name, stranger?"

Kyle leaned forward and buried his fingers in her hair. Damn, he loved being a cat. No long set up time, no sweet talk needed. She had to feel the same driving need he did and there was nothing wrong with them taking this to its natural conclusion without having to do the flowers and poetry shit.

"Kyle." He breathed in deep, his nose buried in the crook of her neck. She arched her body against his, rubbing in all the right spots. He ground his cock against her belly and at the noise she made in response, his brain turned to mush. "What's your name, beautiful? Before we get down to serious business."

She had his top four buttons undone already, her fingers baring his chest to her touch. She leaned forward and licked his collarbone, and he saw stars.

"Call me El. But what serious business could you

possibly be talking about?" Her hand slid down his torso, fingertips teasing his abdomen muscles, tracing the edge of his belt before she pressed her hand between them and cupped his erection. "Very nice, by the way."

"I aim to please."

She leaned forward and nibbled on his earlobe. The momentarily brush of her lips past his cheek drove him mad. He swung his head to the side to capture her mouth, but she managed to elude him. The hand between them continued to rub his length and his eyes rolled back in his skull.

"Red's my favorite color."

There was some kind of code message in that, he was sure of it, but right now, he didn't give a flying fuck about figuring it out. He dropped to his knees, the loss of full body contact with her painful until he consoled himself by staring straight at the vee of her legs. "Let me help you out of these..."

"Such a gentleman--" She gasped as his tongue slid into her belly button. He nearly came as the taste of her flooded his mouth. Salty, sweet and buttery smooth. He traced designs across to her hipbone before snagging the thin elastic riding the bone. He tugged and the edge snapped, the fabric curling back to reveal a bare smooth treasure between her legs.

It was better than any Christmas present he'd ever found under the tree.

"Kyle?"

He couldn't look away. The edges of her labia snuck out, glistening with her cream. He dragged in a deep breath and let the scent of her arousal fill his head.

"Kyle?"

This time she accompanied her words with a tug on his hair, her fingers laced close to his skull. The tiny pinch of pain made him growl as he turned his gaze upward. From this vantage point, her breasts filled his vision, the firm mounds rising between them like an erotic divider. Oh man, he couldn't wait to taste them either. Twirl his tongue around her pretty brown nipples, tease them between his lips until she moaned out his name.

"I think we should take this somewhere a little more private." Her whisper tugged on his balls.

"Why?"

She gestured toward the door with her head. He glanced over, and sure enough under the bottom edge he saw two sets of feet, nervously fidgeting, but plenty close to be able to hear everything they did.

He grinned at her. "So what?"

He didn't care if the legendary shifter sex prowess got another shot of positive reinforcement. In fact, he'd be damn proud to make a few new rumors fly. Except...she was right. A new incident with him at the center of it wouldn't do much for his plans of staying under the radar. It was tough enough being a cougar shifter living around humans. Being a highly sexual one would definitely put them in the spotlight, and right now that would be disastrous.

"Can you find me another set, same size, matching bra and panties, please?" She called out sweetly and after a soft response, the clerks shuffled back into the shop. El smiled down at him. "I have no objections to enjoying your company, big fellow, but I think we should be nice to the girls. Don't want to make them jealous they don't have a nice pussy of their own to play with."

He was going to object, both to stopping and to her calling him a pussy. He was a cougar, dammit, a mountain lion and a part of the ruling clan of the Western Territory. Not that he planned on sharing that particular intel with anyone. But all his protests died when she widened her thighs and dropped her hands between her legs.

One slid over the soft, smooth skin of her mound. She spread her fingers, opening herself to his sight. The other slowly inched down her belly until her index finger hovered over the revealed nub of her clitoris. He watched in silent fascination as she stroked herself. A brief, gentle flick that made her whole body shudder. Then she plunged her finger in, the entire digit disappearing, and he leaned forward involuntarily. He rasped his tongue between her legs, lapping up the cream clinging to the soft surfaces, catching her wrist to keep her buried deep. He licked in circles, sneaking alongside her finger before flicking her clit hard.

She came instantly, moisture flooding from her sex and drawing him in for another taste. He carried on feasting as she shook, her shoulders pressed to the wall, thighs spread to allow his body between her legs.



The sound of footfalls reached his ears and for a second he was tempted to roar out a command for them to get the hell away. He needed to finish this, needed to haul her finger from her body and replace it with his tongue. With his fingers. With his cock, deep and hard, over and over again.

El stole that option away, curling her fingers into his hair and tugging herself free. A knock sounded, and she snuck around him, her bare butt brushing his shoulder, as he remained frozen on his knees. When she opened the door and accepted the clothing he forced himself to pull himself together. She was right. Not here. But they were getting out as fast as possible and finding an appropriate spot before his nuts fell off. The tight fabric of his jeans threatened the circulation in his lower limbs. Getting naked was very high on the priority list.

By the time she had the door shut he'd dragged himself to vertical by leaning against the wall. He had to adjust his cock, cursing lightly under his breath. The ache didn't go away, but at least his vision cleared.

"Get dressed," he ordered.

El lifted a brow. "I need to buy a few things. It seems my underwear has had a mishap."

Kyle held back his snarl but let his lust show. "I'll buy any damn thing you want, but we're out of here in two minutes, whether you're dressed or not."

She laughed, the throaty sound screaming *fuck me* in his ears. She tugged on the bra the clerk had brought, bending over to adjust her boobs, and he had to look away

for a second. Her teasing was going to kill him, but if he was honest, he liked it. Playing was built into the cougar mentality, and she had it in spades. When she looked up he knew his grin was stretching from ear to ear. She ignored the panties altogether and smoothed her miniscule skirt over her bare ass. The boots took a minute to ease on, then she dragged her fingers through her hair and licked her lips.

One more mischievous smile. "I'm ready when you are."  
*Oh. Hell-o.*

She sauntered out ahead of him, snatching up the frilly things she'd had with her. She tugged off the tags and tossed them on the counter. Kyle hated to show he had this kind of cash, but there was no freaking way he was going to wait for the clerks to ring the purchases through. He hauled out his wallet, tossed a couple of hundreds on the counter and grabbed El by the hand.

The clerks' expressions said it all.

Once out on the street he thought fast. While shoving El against the nearest back alley wall and fucking her senseless seemed like a fabulous idea, that was exactly the kind of incident he was supposed to help avoid. Shifters would be shifters, but having the reports in the news was not good for human-shifter relations. After their little warm up session in the shop, the clerks were probably even now texting all their friends. El tugged him down the street and he went willingly, his feet eager to move if it meant the rest of the body would soon be happy. Nearest hotel he knew of

was--

"My place okay?" El dragged him bodily up a set of stairs and he whistled softly.

"Nice..."

She had him through the doors and past the security guard before he had more than a glimpse of red stonework and wrought iron rails.

"Morning, Ms. Scott."

"Morning, Mac."

They were in the elevator, the door closing on yet another wide-eyed human before Kyle could respond. And then he couldn't speak because her tongue was in his mouth, her entire body slamming him against the back wall of the elevator. He snagged both cheeks of her bare ass in his palms, dragging her up his body. She opened her legs and clutched his hips with her knees, using her thighs to rub her torso against his.

Sweet heaven on earth, there was nothing like having a sexual encounter with a fellow cat shifter. Hot, fast, hard. No strings attached. God, he loved his species.

The bell rang, the door slid open and he twirled them around and out the small compartment. He had to use force to separate his lips from hers, yanking her hair to let them both drag for air.

"Which is your place?" he demanded.

She pointed and hauled him down the hall at a run, the heels of her thigh-high boots echoing staccato against the marble flooring. She punched in an access code as he bit

her neck, her hungry growl sending a jolt through his system. The door flew open and they fell in, hands and teeth and tongues attacking each other as if they were starving. El ripped his shirt open, the buttons flying everywhere, the *ping-ping* of them landing on the hardwood floor fading as the rush of blood hit him. She dragged his belt apart. He shredded her shirt from her torso. Her burst of laughter delighted him almost as much as it heated his blood, and he tore open his jeans and let his cock spring free.

Her purr echoed off the walls.

Kyle reached for her, ready to drag her to the floor and fuck her senseless, but she darted out of reach, her eyes bright, torso twitching from side to side.

"Hmm, my pretty kitty wants to play, does she?" He'd prefer to save the games for round two at this point, but even a fuck-hungry cat could control it for a few more seconds.

El grinned at him and twirled, racing down the hall wearing nothing but those damn boots. Her ass taunted him and he sprang after her, darting into the room she'd entered.

Sweet mercy. That was the biggest damn bed he'd ever seen in his life. "Okay, waiting was worth it."

She knelt on the surface facing him. Her breasts swayed slightly as she leaned toward him, nipples drawn into tight buds. He was so caught up in trying to decide what to do first he was immobilized.

El sat back on her heels, knees spread wide. Her

glistening pussy opened to him as she cupped her breasts, dark nipples peeking out through her fingers. "Come on, kitty cat," she purred, "Come and get it."

He leapt onto the bed, caught her in his arms and rolled her under him. Soft skin over firm muscles--whatever this kitten did for a living kept her strong. He lowered himself fully onto her and they both sighed in contentment.

"Hard and fast the first time okay with you?" Kyle dragged his cock over her bare mound. Her wet labia parted and he coated himself in her cream on every rock.

"Hmm..." She didn't answer, just reached around him and with a strong arch of her back, managed to flip them over. Cool, he didn't know many chicks that were strong enough to make his bulk go anywhere. Another sign they were in for a fabulously hard fuck.

"Or...you can be on top. I'm easy." Kyle thrust upward, seeking her entrance. El crawled over him, her crotch deserting his groin. He growled in frustration until he noticed her right breast hung within reach. He snagged the tip with his lips and she let out a moan. She leaned closer, sliding her hands up his arms as she pressed her nipple harder against his mouth. He found himself clutching her with one arm to maintain a grip as he twirled the rock solid tip with his tongue. His other arm she had stretched to the side, above his head. Something cool and solid touched him. There was a loud *click* and El twisted, eluding his mouth, and his hand and his--

Kyle stopped with a jerk, his one arm trapped above his

head. He snarled and twisted, the pillows and sheets scattering as he discovered he was handcuffed to the headboard of the bed.



## Chapter Two

El blew out a long, slow breath in a futile attempt to slow her runaway libido. On the bed, all six feet plus of her quarry thrashed and swore as he wrenched the cuff and growled loudly at her. She had suspected he'd be tough to subdue, but she had forgotten how hard it was to turn off her own cat hormones once she'd let them get going.

Acting the hussy had felt too damn good.

"What the hell is this?" Kyle roared. He jerked his arm violently again, and she involuntarily stiffened as the bed frame creaked, even though she knew it had tested strong enough to restrain him.

She slipped to the dresser and pulled her wallet from the drawer, flipping it open to flash her badge. "LAPD. Kyle Branegan, I need to inform you that for your own safety, and for the security of the citizens at large, I've been authorized to take you into custody."

"What the fuck--arrested?" Kyle froze in the middle of shaking the wall with his wild tugs.

"No, not arrested. Consider it more in the lines of protection."

"Sweetheart, you're making a big mistake. In case you haven't noticed, I'm a cat. I don't need any damn protection offered by the human police force."

He wiggled backward until he sat against the headboard and she couldn't pry her gaze away. The man was too



damn easy on the eyes, every inch mouthwatering, fit and muscular, all of it just her type. From the deep green of his eyes to the intriguing trail of curls leading down to where his cock rose from his groin, the hard length tapping his belly. *Oh, sugar.* El forced herself to focus on his face.

"You live at the harbor, correct? Slip two-fifty-four?"

He nodded slowly.

"A few nights ago there was a commotion at the end of the dock. Remember anything about the incident?"

He frowned. "It was a couple of kids making noise. I told them to shut up, they took one look at me, freaked, and all I heard for the rest of the night were regular dock sounds. I didn't even report it to the port authorities. I told you, being a shifter comes in handy at times." He slowed, his gaze tracing over her body, voice dropping a notch as he spoke again, lusty and low. "Like now. You, me, we're both shifters. That could be handy, you know."

She disregarded his smug expression and the casual way he adjusted his position on the bed. Completely ignored the mesmerizing tone of his voice as he purred sexual intent in her direction. Forced herself to pay no attention to his free hand dropping to fist his cock and stroking it firmly--

*Holy shit.*

Two steps brought her to the edge of the bed, where he grinned at her. His taunting expression told her all she needed about him and his attitude. Even cuffed to her bed he thought he had the upper hand, but the big cat had

another think coming. She hadn't progressed this far in the force by being an easy touch. If he wanted to play rough, she was more than willing to oblige. Ignoring the violent urge to crawl over him and taste the liquid glistening at the head of his cock, she stared into his face.

"Well, someone reported the incident and your involvement in it. Your presence is required at a court hearing to be held January seventeenth. I'm to ensure that you appear as requested."

"If I'm happy, I could do just about anything for you. Want to make me happy?"

*Stroke. Stroke.* El swallowed hard.

"All I know is I have to make sure you show up to witness in court. The--"

"This seems a little out of the ordinary. I mean, the way you've chosen to 'suggest' I need to cooperate." He interrupted her, pausing his right hand to shake his left. The rattling sound of the cuffs against the metal bed frame rang loud in her ears.

His sarcasm made her smile. "As you mentioned, my superiors are aware you're a cat shifter. If I'd come to your boat and told you we needed you to show in court, possibly even hide out for a while, what would your response have been?"

"No fucking way. My life is my life."

She shrugged. Typical cat reaction. Cat shifters usually didn't stay in one spot for long enough to keep tabs on them. Keeping him under complete surveillance was the

only part of this weird assignment that made sense. "My point exactly."

They stared at each other. "It seems a little over the top, putting me into custody just so I can identify a couple of kids making mischief."

*Yup.* Totally haywire, but who was she to argue with the men at the top? "Frankly, it seems slightly overboard to me as well, but I have my orders. I hope you understand."

"Well, I hope *you* know what you're doing, darling, because trying to keep a cat on a leash is going to get really old, really fast."

El sat on the edge of the bed. Sweet mercy, he was the biggest cat she'd ever seen, and the sexiest. Yeah, the attraction he held was partly from letting her motor get running in the first place, but he was enough to make any woman wet. *Stick to business, girl.* "I figure you're smart enough to know a good deal when you hear one."

He paused at that, some of the bluster fading away. "What kind of deal you offering?"

"I see this going two ways. I have permission from my chief to use whatever means necessary to deal with you and keep you around until the trial." She pointed behind him. "The bed and wall have been reinforced, the cuffs are shifter approved. You transform to cougar, they'll adjust to size and you stay trapped. It's going to be a terribly unentertaining Christmas if I have to babysit your ass for the next month."

Kyle gave the cuff a casual tug, grunting at the strength

of it. "You did your homework well."

She grinned. That was the plain, honest truth, and getting the responsibility for this task made her very proud. She'd like to think she hadn't simply gotten this job because she was the only other cougar shifter in the area, but because she'd proven her worth on the force. "I think the alternative is quite attractive. If you agree to stay in my immediate company and follow my directions, we can go anywhere we want, as long as it's low profile."

A flicker of interest brightened his eyes. "Hawaii? Tahiti?"

A laugh escaped her. Like she hadn't expected that one. "Opportunist. You know, I thought of that, but flying is out of the question, not with the increased security at the airports for the holiday season. Two cougars traveling together would be noticed--probably even make media attention, since we don't often fly. I doubt that fits the part of my assignment that states I need to keep you in relative obscurity. If you agree, however, I will un-cuff you and let you spend Christmas with my family."

He wrinkled his nose. His very handsome and aristocratic nose. "Spending time with a group of cats I don't even know? Oh golly gee willikers! That sounds like *sooo* much fun. *Not.*"

Yeah, it wasn't her first choice for a good time either, but after careful consideration, it was the best solution. Her family lived in the smallest and most boring town on earth. The most exciting thing that ever happened was Uncle

Buck getting tangled in his own trap line. Talk about perfect places to hide out until the trial. Besides, there would be nowhere for Kyle to run. Still, it looked as if a little additional convincing was in order. El took a slow glance around the room as she reached underneath the dresser and yanked out a bedpan. His eyes grew wide as she tossed it next to him.

"Of course, the decision is completely up to you."

\* \* \*

Kyle shook his head again. "No way."

El growled as she dismounted the souped-up Harley and strode closer to crowd his personal space. "It's my freaking bike, and no one drives her but me."

He had to fight for control as her scent wrapped around them. The aroma of still-aroused female cougar mixed with her current state of mind, and he was close to jumping her. Man, she was fucking hot when she was pissed. "I'm not the passenger kind. When I agreed to this kidnapping you never said a word about me riding shotgun."

"You want me to drag you behind the bike by your ankles instead?" Her eyes flashed at him and his cock got hard. Again. *Hmm, feisty.*

"You and what army?"

She stomped off in exasperation and his gaze trailed after her as he admired the flex of her ass under her leathers. Oh yeah, this wasn't exactly what he'd signed up

for all those years ago, but it was damn close. Adventure, excitement, the chance to have his fur ripped off by temperamental cat shifters. His cheeks hurt from grinning so much.

Of course he'd agreed to her deal. He understood where she was coming from. She was right--there were plenty of cat types who often took off at a moment's notice. He wasn't typical; he'd never leave a court case in the lurch, although even after racking his brains he couldn't remember anything unusual about the little dock altercation. And he totally didn't believe he needed to be protected, but he'd reached the point in his current investigation where he needed to do some computer research. Didn't matter if he did that down on his houseboat or at her folks' house. The data he sought would be there as soon as he figured his way through all the layers of protection.

Besides, she'd looked bloody serious about that bedpan.

El paced back and forth at the side of the harbor parking lot, hands waving in the air as she muttered curses. Heck, if he had to be hand tied to another cougar, she was a mighty fine choice. Somewhere in the next few days he was sure he'd be able to convince her to drop the "official" cop position and let their normal impulses take over. She'd refused to do anything about his blue balls before unlocking him from the bed and hauling him down to his houseboat to grab a few necessities. That just wasn't...natural, to ignore the cat's drive for sexual play.

A tiny twinge of guilt hit for not telling her what he really did for a living. Usually he had no issue fabricating an out-and-out lie. This time, with her also being in law enforcement, pulling her leg seemed a little on the rotten side. Still, the Cougar Shifter Investigators had stayed under the radar of both humans and the shifter world since its inception ten years ago. While the revealing of the existence of shifters had gone relatively smoothly, mainly due to the prominent positions many shifters held, i.e. the President of the United States and the head of the UN, humans still outnumbered shifters five to one. In the interest of hospitable relations, it was safer to keep the wilder side of their nature under wraps. That was his job in the covert CSI—to find trouble situations before the media did and spin-doctor them the best way possible. It was an interesting, and usually safe, task. Most cat indiscretions involved territory marking, not murder.

He slid his hand through his hair and laughed lightly. The fact she'd insisted on leaving her rooms without him getting any satisfaction had irked him no end, thus the bit of tormenting now. Maybe it was time to give her a break.

"Fine, I'll take the back. But you're buying me lunch."

El froze, turning slowly to face him. "Now you're okay with it? That easy?"

Her ice princess expression made his toes curl with need. What he wouldn't do to arrange a little melting session. He grinned just to watch her reaction. "Which way are we headed and how long a trip?"

She slammed the extra helmet she held into his chest before shouldering past him to remount the bike. "First star on the right and straight on until morning. And if you ask 'are we there yet?' too many times, I'll use the tranq dart I've got and bungee-cord you to the hog."

Eight hours later he was ready for her to put him out of his misery. Leaning against her warm body, his hands resting lightly on her hips, nostrils filled with her light scent...His damn dick was the one shouting "is it time?" The fields flying past gave way to low bush, then trees, and she still hadn't spoken. Not when they made pit stops for gas and coffee, not when he accidentally rubbed a trifle too hard against her butt.

That wasn't fucking acceptable, to ignore him and his cock, and all the naughty things he wanted to do to her. He clicked on the mouthpiece of the helmet so they could communicate.

"So. Christmas with the Clampetts. Tell me what to expect. Mom, Dad--I imagine you've been out of the house for a while?" Cats never stayed home once they reached maturity. It wasn't wise to have too many grown cougars in the same territory. Heck, he'd had his bags packed early, and the day he turned eighteen he'd bee-lined out the door. Of course that was also because his guardian of an uncle was an asshole.

She didn't speak for a minute and he wondered if he'd get the silent treatment the entire journey to Timbuktu or wherever the hell they were headed. "Actually, my family is



a little different."

He waited.

"There might be a throwback gene or two to humans in our blood. My sisters still live at home. And I've got a few younger brothers. For some reason the folks seem to enjoy everyone hanging around. They pride themselves on living more like the local human population than your typical cat clan. Don't get me wrong, it's a completely safe place to take you, it's just that..."

Her body had grown tense under his grasp and he slid one hand forward to rub her belly. Didn't know if it made her feel any better. Made him feel a whole lot of things.

"I haven't been home since last Christmas," she confessed.

"Rightly so. No need to cling to the family. You're a grown-up. It's not a crime to move on with your life."

Just like he had, although he doubted she had left to escape connections with the ruling family of cougars for the Western Territories. The warm skin under his hand relaxed him enough he would admit, at least to himself, he had joined the CSI as a way out of the societal pressures of his elite family. The image of his Uncle Roy flashed into Kyle's brain, stirring up dark emotions. After his parents went missing, his obnoxiously strict uncle became temporary regent of the clan. Between that man and propriety-obsessed Aunt Janet, who took over the upbringing of him and his two older brothers, life had changed.

Kyle paused. That wasn't completely fair, to blame it all

on his uncle and aunt. He wasn't sure what specifically he would have done differently--as the third son he hadn't been in line to lead, thank God, and he didn't have to deal with any diplomatic shit like his second bro. Nope, tradition in the Cougar Ruling Clan meant he had to enter either the priesthood or the police, and he wasn't about to *choose* a vocation that required celibacy.

There was no bloody way he was sharing any of that particular information with El either. If she was determined to keep him under wraps as a simple guy off the street, he could only imagine what she'd do if she found out he was actually third in line for leadership of the cat clans.

Her sigh echoed through the headset. "Well, around my hometown they make you feel as if it's a crime to leave. You're supposed to be there for all the family events, birthdays, anniversaries, first dose of catnip. Drives me stark raving mad."

Kyle laughed, happy to get his mind off his past. "Hate to say it, but you do know you're the normal one? Cats don't hang in groups. Well..." He rubbed her belly again, dropping his hand to cover her mound lightly "...not unless it's for a group orgy or something."

"Ew, do you mind? This is my family we're talking about. I think I just threw up a little."

"You did mention sisters--"

She slammed her hand against his and hauled it off where he'd been rubbing between her legs. "Kyle Branegan, I'll say this once. You want to keep your balls

attached, keep the hell away from my sisters. If you feel the need to go tomcatting around--"

"Slow down, sweetie, just kidding." He relinquished his grasp, then changed tactics, slipping under her jacket and shirt to slide his palm slowly upward along the smooth warm skin of her belly until he'd captured a breast. She wiggled under him, the bike weaving a little. "I wouldn't dream of doing anything with your sisters. Besides, I'm going to be busy enough taking care of you, right?"

"This is strictly a business relationship. In spite of the way things started between us, there will be no further funny business."

Her nipple had hardened under his palm, and the throaty sound of her voice over the radio speakers said something totally opposite her words.

"We're cats, El. You can't tell me you don't want me."

It was clear her body wanted him. He circled the hard tip of her nipple with a finger and she arched against his hand. If he weren't wearing the helmet, he would have buried his face in her neck and nibbled his way along her hairline until they had to make an unscheduled pit stop for a session of unrestrained cougar sex.

When she finally answered him, her voice was controlled and very prim. "I'm going to tell Mom and Dad you're a friend who needs a place to stay during the holidays. They'll be delighted to meet you."

"Friends, hey? With benefits?"

"No," she snapped out. "No benefits. I'll admit I like you,

but that's entirely beside the point. I'm on a case, and fooling around with you would be wrong."

Kyle reluctantly withdrew his hand from under her shirt and resettled more chastely. "Okay."

Dead silence. He waited. From the little bit he'd seen of her, teasing could totally go both ways. The surest way to make her want him was to make her admit it to herself.

"Even if we're both shifters and the urge was there...and I'm not saying it is, mind you. But if it were, we don't have to give into it."

The urge to snort in disbelief was powerful, but he managed to play it cool. "No problem."

She wiggled again, and he grinned at nothing. *Me thinketh the lady doth protesteth too much.* Face facts--she wanted him too. They *were* cats after all. This adventure got more interesting all the time.

"My parents' house is small--although they did mention adding an addition this past year. Something about making extra room for my brothers. Still, I suspect you'll be sleeping in the guest room, and I'll bunk with my sisters."

*Fuck.* Well, he'd find a way around that somehow. Not that sex was all he thought about. Kyle paused for a moment. He was pretty sure there were other things he thought about.

He shook his head and forced himself to answer her, ignoring the images that leapt to mind of her in the scarlet-red bikini-bra set he'd purchased for her that morning. "No worries then. You've got it all figured out. I feel so safe

already."

She sighed again. "Yeah, except from Christmas overdose. I hope you're up on your Christmas carols. And you're not allergic to fruitcake, are you?"

*What the hell? "Why?"*

She took a corner at a slightly-higher-than-suggested speed, and he hung on for dear life. "My parents are kinda big on the holiday. Traditionally, they've decorated the bungalow to within an inch of its life. We have deer ornaments on the lawn, North Pole candy canes on the roof and a runway for Santa's sleigh. One year my dad tried to make one of those sequential light displays that made the deer look like they were leaping, but he fell and electrocuted himself, so only Rudolph's nose flickered."

Kyle couldn't suppress a burst of laughter. "I'm sorry about your dad, but it's all sounding more and more peachy keen by the minute. Are you sure we don't want to try for Tahiti instead?"

He could have sworn she muttered "In my dreams."

El fell silent again as they headed into the mountains, and he gave her space. Going home to a situation that made you uncomfortable--yeah, he understood how that would be tough. Good thing he would be around to help her pass the time not spent a-wassailing. He let his mind wander to all the pleasurable Yuletide activities he could dream up. Like wrapping her in tinsel and playing with the sparkling strands until she screamed his name.

The sky was fading to twilight when she straightened

and clicked the radio back on. "A couple more corners. It's the place on the left, the beige bungalow from Christmas hell. You ready for this?"

"More than you, I think. You've got me curious."

Especially when they cruised smoothly around the bend, and there was no bungalow. Instead a huge three-story mansion greeted them, with pristinely groomed lawns and a massive circular driveway. The only part she'd gotten right was the gaudy decorations. Kyle had never seen so many twinkling lights in his life. El swung to a stop at the enormous stone gatehouse blocking the entrance and they both removed their helmets to stare in amazement. Lights flickered, music blared and there was a life-sized mannequin dressed in a Santa suit crawling in and out of the chimney.



## Chapter Three

The stages of crisis--El figured she went through them in under thirty seconds flat. Denial, anger, acceptance...No, that last one didn't trigger as quickly.

This was impossible.

"Ms. Eloise, how good to see you again!"

El swung to the right to discover a familiar face moving toward them. Although the last time she'd seen the old man he'd been partially hidden under a newspaper on a park bench, not dressed in a sharp blue uniform with a matching cap.

"Mr. McKintly? What are you doing here?"

He brushed his fingers along the brim of his cap and gave a smart little bow. "I'm moving up in the world, I am. Your folks, good as gold they are, were kind enough to give an old pensioner a little taste of the good life. Easy job, if I can say so. Go on up, I'll radio ahead you've arrived." He slipped back into the gatehouse before she could pry any further information out of him.

She was sure her jaw was on the ground as she faced where her childhood home had stood. Had she taken a few wrong turns? Hit a temporal anomaly and warped into an alternative universe?

"Troubles?"

Shit. She'd been so shocked by the non-appearance of her parent's house, she'd actually forgotten about Kyle for a



minute. That's when she knew this wasn't a dream, because only a hard slap of reality could make her forget the cougar who had her panties soaking wet simply from leaning his warm torso against hers for the past nine hours, twenty-three minutes and fifty-seven seconds.

"That's not my house." Maybe if she said it often enough the world would realign itself.

A pair of arms circled her and she found herself being patted comfortingly on the back. The warmth of his touch soothed her, not to mention her nose was buried against his chest and he smelled So. Damn. Good.

"Family. Never know what they're going to do next to drive us mad, eh?"

She fought the giggles. They were a damn good indicator that she was on the edge of hysteria. "Yeah, damn, hey? Tear down the family home with the rickety playground set and the tire swing, and pop up Windsor Palace in its place. How inconsiderate of them."

"There's still a tire swing."

He released her, and she spun. Sure enough, off to the left of the monstrosity of a house the solid oak spread its limbs, and dangling beneath it was the old tire she and her sisters had sat upon for hours, planning what they would do to escape into the "real world."

And something settled inside her. The whole world wasn't screwed up. She eyed the house. Well, a large portion of it was, but still...

"Come on, Kyle. Let's go see what the hell is up."

El parked them to the side of the wide front staircase, squaring her shoulders as she gestured them forward. "I have no idea what's going on, but let me do the talking. Follow my lead, okay?"

He nodded, slinging the bike bags over his shoulder. "I'll be as meek as a kitten. Trust me." She narrowed her eyes for a second, and he grinned. "Really."

Kyle glanced around as they paced the mile to the front door. The place was a little reminiscent of his own childhood home--not that he'd tell her that--only this house had something extra to it. Yeah, it was big, as in really big, makes-a-guy-want-to-shift-and-start-marking-territory big, but it wasn't all fancy-dancy like his aunt had decorated their Colorado mansion.

The stairs were wood, not marble, the railings made of lodge pole pine or something close to it. The place wasn't constructed entirely of log, but there were log features everywhere.

There were signs of kids everywhere, as well. A pair of tricycles stood beside a rustic porch swing. Rubber boots were piled high at the far end of the porch, and faintly in the distance the high-pitched tones of children's voices rang.

"How many brothers and sisters did you say--?"

The massive front doors swung open, interrupting his question, and a solid woman burst out, her plain blue cotton dress severely out of place next to the life-sized ornamental

Santa Claus that jiggled and roared *ho, ho, ho* as she triggered the motion sensor.

"Eloise Inez! Oh my baby, it's so good to have you home!"

El was snatched up in the woman's arms and spun in circles as if she weighed no more than a child of five. Her face, during the brief glimpses Kyle caught as she spun rapidly past, was halfway between happy and totally mortified. He leaned back on one of the vertical porch posts and grinned at the homecoming, damn grateful it was her, not him, being manhandled.

A light thump sounded on his right, and he glanced to the side where a huge cougar body unwound from where he'd landed. The beast, who was slightly graying around the whiskers, padded straight in Kyle's direction.

It would have been more frightening if a) Kyle weren't pretty damn sure this was El's dad, b) the cougar didn't have a Santa hat tied to its head and c) Kyle weren't even bigger in his own cougar form.

There were times that, dammit all, size did matter.

He bowed politely though. If there was anything his upbringing had taught him, it was that it never hurt to go through the motions.

"Daddy!" El untangled herself from her mom's greeting and threw herself at her father, wrapping her arms around him and squeezing tight. The beast licked the side of her face, his huge tongue covering most of her skin all at the same time and she laughed. "I missed you too."

"We were so pleased to hear you could make it home. We've got so much to tell you." El kept one arm wrapped around her father's neck as she turned her face toward her mom.

"Um, yeah. A few teeny tiny details. Like, what happened to the house?"

Mrs. Scott crossed her arms in front of her and straightened slightly. "I told you we had renovations done."

The exasperation in El's voice made Kyle smile. "Mom. Renovations are adding on a couple rooms for the boys, or finally fixing the hole in the wall cousin Gertrude made when she had that attack of vertigo while in cougar form. But all this? Since last Christmas? And the cost--how could you afford this?"

Her mother shrugged. "Just a spot of luck at the casino."

"A spot? How did I miss hearing about this?"

"Well, I had told you we had a surprise to tell you, but you've been too busy in your big city life to come back for a visit." Mr. Scott rumbled softly, his huge cougar head swaying from side to side, and his wife nodded in agreement. "Papa is right. We'll explain everything, but not out here on the porch. We've got all the holiday to catch you up to speed."

Then suddenly there were three sets of eyes all gazing intently at him, and Kyle shifted uneasily on his feet. It was a little too homey for him at the moment. He didn't really need to do this, did he? He cleared his throat and considered shifting and making a break for it.

El shot to her feet and returned to his side. "Mom, Daddy. This is Kyle Branegan. He's going to join us for the holidays. I hope that's all right with you."

"Evening, ma'am. Sir. Very nice to meet you."

He was eyeballed like a piece of Grade A beef hanging at the butcher shop. They were probably considering what wicked cat-shifter things he and their daughter were up to, and wondering if they could bury his body under the concrete of the new swimming pool. Or...maybe not, because Mrs. Scott made a face, then dismissed him with a happy grin. "No troubles at all, Eloise Inez. There's a spare room off the nursery, next door to the little boys."

"That would be fine." It would be too. He could go play hide and seek in the dark hallways after everyone was in bed. Following El's delicate scent would be a pleasure.

A crowd poured out the door and surrounded them. There were children of all sizes, their happy voices ringing as they crawled over El. Kyle did his best to count, but they never stayed still. Then there were small creatures around his own ankles and he had to struggle to stay vertical. A couple of the youngest accidentally shifted to cat form, their clothes bunching around their furry bodies and Kyle snatched one up a second before it hit the porch deck.

"Hey, Elly, 'bout time you made it home." A throaty voice tickled his eardrums and he glanced over to discover a pair of gorgeous twins strolling through the door. The one on the right spotted him, her eyes widening as she ate him up with her gaze. "Hmm, and you brought us a Christmas present.

How sweet of you."

These weren't little girls, more like early twenties. They were both dressed in Santa's helper's costumes and usually the pushed-up bosoms and short, short skirts would have had his tongue hanging out like a damn dog's, but after the entire day being primed and ready by El's smart-ass, take-no-prisoner attitude, they didn't do much for him.

That fact seriously worried him. It seemed not only was her family abnormal, they were contagious, as well.

Bosomy and double-trouble, and he wasn't reacting? *Fuck.*

El slipped her arm around his waist, tucking against his side, and although having her brush up intimately was awfully nice, he totally didn't expect it. Especially not when she pulled in tighter, resting her head on his chest.

Because he didn't expect it he wasn't prepared to stop the purr of interest that immediately rumbled to the surface. Her parents both clued in on his reaction, her mom raising a brow and her dad leaning forward slightly, his cougar eyes narrowing as he looked Kyle up and down. Kyle suspected he was no longer considered Grade A, probably downgraded to chopped liver. The whole clan stilled, waiting for their father's reaction.

*Shit.*

El cleared her throat. "Mom, he's with me. If you don't have a room for us, we'll find a place in town. Whatever works best for you."

Kyle willed his body to not react. Getting a hard-on in front of her folks was not the way to make a good

impression, but still...Did she just insinuate they would be sleeping together? Okay, most cats were up front about their sex lives, but in front of their sires was rather on the *oh my word that's not what I want to talk about right now* side. He leaned over to whisper in her ear. "I thought we were 'just friends.'"

El twisted her head and the sweet scent of her perfume and the cherry gum she was chewing floated past his cheek. "Improvise with me here. I'll explain later."

Whoop-dee-fucking-doo. Change in game plan so he got to end up in the same bed as her? Okay. That kind of improvisation he could do. He rubbed his chin along the top of her head and smiled sweetly at the parental unit. "Thank you so much for letting us join you for the holidays."

\* \* \*

A steaming mug of decaf coffee in her hands, El cuddled up in an oversized recliner in front of the massive fireplace that took up an entire wall in her bedroom. The triple shot of Baileys in the fiery hot liquid was the only thing making her able to sit without fidgeting.

Okay, that whole situation had gotten out of control *way* too quickly.

It was great to see her folks again, although it was true, she'd been avoiding coming home. She liked the big city, liked the people she hung out with, and it was so good to have gotten away from the whole clan of hers, where the

women were barefoot and pregnant most of the time.

She considered her ever-increasing number of younger siblings. While it was nice in some way that her parents were still so much in love...just ick. Popping out a kitten every year or two was not in Eloise Inez's future plans, no sir.

And now, because of the insane change in circumstances, she was going to be babysitting her charge while he was in the same room as her. The same freaking *bed*.

She took a steadying sip of the liquid liquor mix. It had to happen. Once she'd realized the vast size of the house, there was no way she was going to leave him unsupervised at nights, not when she knew how much cats liked to play. There were other females in the house, like her sisters. Delilah and Darleen. It wasn't that she was jealous of them--heck, they'd all been best friends before she'd taken off to join the police force. And it wasn't that she didn't trust him, or her sisters, only she knew all about cats, and cat libidos, and...Damn it anyway.

So now she and Kyle were sharing a room, and she'd just have to deal with having every sexy inch of him rubbing her all night long. She tilted the mug and drained every last drop.

She'd managed to beg off any further serious discussion, or house tours, or any kind of family event for the evening, claiming fatigue from the long ride. The looks the Double Ds gave Kyle made her tug him along with her



for his own good.

El sighed. Yeah, and if she kept telling herself that lie, maybe it would become true.

She took a long look around the room. Whatever the hell had happened with her parents' finances, the new place was insanely gorgeous. Her parents had included a room for her in the renovations, with a private bath, a sitting area and the gargantuan fireplace. Floor-to-ceiling windows in the dormer were open, and the twinkling of Christmas lights around the window trim reflected in to add a psychedelic touch to the football-field-sized bed. Massive posts on the four corners rose to a scarlet canopy. It was exactly the kind of bed she'd dreamed about having when she was little.

The door to the bathroom opened and a swirl of steam wafted out along with six feet plus of the sexiest cougar male she'd ever seen. He had a towel knotted low around his hips, water droplets still clinging to his shoulders as he stalked over to the bike bag.

Down. Do not look. Do not stare. *Do not drool.*

It was too late.

Kyle pivoted on the spot and winked at her. "Which side of the bed do you want?"

El swallowed hard. "Doesn't matter."

He nodded slowly, slipped off the towel and crawled under the sheets. El closed her eyes and gritted her teeth together. She counted to ten. Then to twenty.

"Kyle, where are your clothes?"

He sat up to plump the pillows a few times before

propping them behind his head. "In the drawer."

She sighed. "I mean the ones you're going to sleep in."

It wasn't possible, but his grin seemed to get wider. "I don't sleep in anything. Need to be able to shift in an instant, you know, and the last time I got tangled in a pair of jockeys, it wasn't a pretty picture."

True--most shifters did sleep in the nude in case they involuntarily changed during the night but..."Do you have to seem so damn smug about it?"

Kyle gazed at her steadily for a long while before he cleared his throat. "Look, I understand you're in a bit of a pickle. You need to keep an eye on me--your job and all. At the same time, your family has gone and pulled a pauper to a prince routine, and add to the mix that bad Christmas caroling is getting seriously annoying as background Muzak. But you've got a few issues I think we're going to have to deal with. You don't spend a lot of time around shifters, do you?"

"What does that mean?" He was looking at her as if she was some freak of nature or a part of a science experiment. She hated that with a passion.

"Answer the question. I'm not talking only cats, but wolves, or bears, or birds of prey--"

"I fail to see what that has to do with anything."

"It has tons to do with the snit you're working yourself up to, and since I'm also suffering because of your self-denial of our species' needs--"

She shot to her feet. "Is this about me refusing to have

sex with you? You're a job. I told you that. I'm a member of the LAPD and I do not fuck my assignments."

"So you said. But I'm not only an assignment, I'm a fellow cat shifter, and there are sub-rules and understandings that should override your interpretation of the human conventions."

*Holy crap.* "Are you this desperate to get laid you're going to try and turn this into a logical debate?"

"Hey, I'm just saying that I'm not the one who masturbated in front of you in a lingerie shop."

El held back the urge to stomp her foot. Instead she stormed to the foot of the bed and glared at him. "I can't believe you brought that up again. I knew you'd expect that kind of response from a fellow shifter, that's all. By pretending, I got you interested enough to go back--"

"Yeah, yeah, it was all a part of the job. Bullshit. You like me, we're cats and if you're going to insist we not have sex, good luck to that. I think you need to consider a little harder what you want, and a little less what you think you need to be doing to fit in."

*Bastard.* "I don't like you very much, Kyle Branegan."

"You don't need to, sweetie. I'm not asking you to marry me. I'm not looking for a forever thing here--"

"Good," she interrupted, getting ready to lambaste him.

He snarled and a wave of power blasted out. She snapped her lips together and froze in fear, and excitement. It was the first time she'd actually felt his power as a shifter. It burst from him as his temper flared. A shiver raced over

her skin, and she was hit with a strong desire to crawl to him and rub herself against his belly. Holy shit, he was strong--way stronger than she was, if she was honest.

They both remained still, El because she was afraid if she said anything she'd crumble into a kitty zombie and do anything he requested.

A wary expression stole over his face and he sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that." He scrubbed his face and she inched past the foot of the bed on her way to the bathroom door. Oh. My. Lord. What had she gotten herself into? She'd never met a cat with that level of strength before.

Kyle twisted on the bed, speaking softly now, gentling her. "Let's just forget this conversation. We got off on the wrong foot, in a way. Traveling took a lot out of us, and your family, and...everything. I swear I'll keep my hands off you tonight. Go shower, and come sleep. We'll figure it out in the morning."

El stole into the bathroom and fired up the shower as hot as possible, attempting to burn away her fears and frustrations. Her family, her job. Trying to be a cat shifter in the middle of a ton of humans--was he right? Was she so busy trying to fit in she'd been completely denying what she was?

Acting the hussy that morning for him had felt damn good. Better than anything she remembered doing for a long time. She'd figured it was because the sting was a success, but his accusation was correct--she hadn't

needed to get so intimate with him in the shop. He'd fingered her, and licked her, and she'd...loved every minute of it. That had nothing to do with being undercover, and everything to do with letting her rigid rules loose.

El swiped the fog from the mirror to stare into her tired eyes. Was she lying to herself by trying to act too human? By trying to avoid the things she hated about her species, was she ignoring too much? She was not going to be someone's little woman and sacrifice her career, dammit all.

She patted herself dry on the plush terrycloth bath towel and took a deep breath. Yeah, she wasn't planning on sleeping in pajamas or anything either. Having a nightshirt choke you in your sleep was not a fun way to wake up. She could do this. Completely ignore the mental turmoil, the physical rush of desire he gave her. Ignore it and get some sleep. Maybe.

She nudged open the door and the bathroom light pooled across the bed. Three hundred pounds of tawny cougar lay tangled in the sheets and she laughed softly. Well, that was a solution to their sleeping dilemma that hadn't occurred to her. El tugged the sheets free from under his lower paws and crawled in next to him. The heat of his bulk wrapped around her, and as she snuggled tight against his furry body he rolled to drape one long, heavy limb over her torso. He rumbled in his sleep--a low, calming sound--and she had to admit one thing.

Having another cat in bed with her? Pretty damn good.



## Chapter Four

Kyle cracked one eye open. The tinny version of "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" that floated through the air was nowhere near as distracting as the mound of hot breast in his hand. He waited a minute, desperately trying to remember if he'd gone home with someone after a night at a club or brought someone back to his houseboat. Of course, once he woke enough to realize the bed wasn't rocking, the pier was out. There was no scent of salt from the harbor, but a heavy layer of gingerbread and nutmeg--  
El.

*Oh shit.* And he was the Grinch who shoved Christmas down the poor little Whos' throats. Damn, he'd been an asshole last night. Not intentionally, but still.

He was totally and completely awake now, including parts of his anatomy he wished had an on/off switch like the ten-foot snowman presiding over the far corner of the room. Kyle's erection was tucked like a present in a box along the smooth crease of El's naked ass. She pressed intimately against him, arching her breast into his hand.

*The square root of sixty-four is eight. The nineteenth president of the United States was Rutherford B. Hayes. If you left Cincinnati on a train loaded with dynamite going west at eighty miles per hour and met a train full of bricks heading east, howbig would the ensuing explosion be?*

"I've been thinking about what you said." El spoke quietly

and his heart leapt to his throat. His first thought was he still had his nuts, so she couldn't have been awake for long. His second thought was the realization she'd rubbed against him *while* she was most definitely awake.

Hallelujah and pass the mistletoe. Not that he'd lectured her simply to get into her pants.

No. Really.

He'd thought it over as he'd fallen asleep waiting for her to come to bed. First, he'd changed to cat form to make sure she knew he was serious. Cats never fucked inside in their wild form. That was one tradition none of them would break, so shifting was as good as promising hands off.

Guilt over snapping at her last night hit him. It had been a hell of a day, but at the same time there were so many things about the whole situation that had slowly built up to piss him off. Fine, maybe he wasn't hanging out with the ruling clan anymore, but he still knew what was right for his people. And hiding their nature and pretending to be humans--hell, that's why they'd come out of the closet so many years ago, so they could be themselves. Let the strengths of the humans and the strengths of the shifters blend together for a better world. Work together in harmony...*yada yada yada*.

Damn it. He was as bad as his brother Conner--spouting off about the good of the species. No, he was worse, because he doubted Conn had ever verbally harassed a poor shifter girl who was simply confused about her sexuality and her place in the world.



El rolled and he leaned back slightly to allow her room to maneuver. "I think you're right. I've been fighting my cat for a long time. It's not wrong to want you."

He didn't say anything, just stared down at her. Her bright hazel eyes traced his face and she brought up a hand to stroke slowly along his jaw line. Her touch sent a bolt of electricity running through him. She threaded her fingers into his hair and tugged his head down to hers and the sound of jingle bells increased.

Her mouth was so soft as she nibbled on him, her tongue sneaking out to dip briefly past his lips. He rocked forward slightly, letting one thigh slip between hers, his shaft solid against her leg as she wrapped her arms farther around his neck.

This kind of kissing was so different from the frantic rutting charge they'd shared yesterday morning, and he kinda liked it. The gentleness seemed almost an apology for his harsh words of the night before, true though they'd been. He'd been an ass to rub it in her face when she was so tired and so confused. But now, as their tongues tangled, he was all for letting the rubbing of another sort commence.

The spicy tang of sex danced over his taste buds. She writhed sensuously under him, letting their skin slide together, hot and slick. Kyle breathed in deep, the aroma of her filling his senses and making his head spin. El dug her nails into his shoulders, then dragged them down his bare skin, coaxing a groan of pleasure from his lips.

Yesterday's wild introduction had created an ache for hot, hard and potentially creative sessions of sex with this woman. A not-so-subtle change occurred as he rolled her on top, lips staying in contact, tongues dancing together. Oh, he still wanted her in every possible position and permutation he could think of, but maybe it all needed to be dialed down a notch or two. With her single statement she had offered him something completely out of her comfort zone. Making sex a big deal wasn't the cat way, but then she hadn't been living like a cat.

He'd never before in his life had the urge to go this slow and careful.

El twisted her way out of his grasp to sit, her strong thighs straddling his waist. The wet heat of her sex pressed against his abdomen, her cream coating him. He admired her body as she rose over him, her firm breasts with dark areolas, the gentle scoop of her waist, the flare of her hips. He followed his gaze with his hands, brushing his knuckles against the underside of her breasts, molding his palms to her skin to appreciate the warmth. When he settled his hands on her hips he couldn't resist, dragging her forward until her sex was centered over his mouth.

"Kyle, I..." She stared down at him, eyes wide. She put one hand out to grip the top of the headboard. "I feel like I should be--"

"Shhh...There's no should. Forget what brought us here. You're very beautiful, and I want to make you feel amazing. Let me."

He lowered her to his mouth and lapped in a lazy circle around her labia, opening her to his touch, filling his head with her taste and scent. She was damn wet, and with each teasing stroke her arousal increased. The tensing and twitching of her ass muscles under his hands helped him gauge her response. Slower now, then faster. A tap against her clit, a drag through her core. A thrust as deep as his tongue could reach. When she rocked against him, striving for more, he held her tighter, squeezing the rounds of her ass cheeks as he sucked and tormented her clit. El purred and moaned, the gasps coming closer together, more rapidly until she tightened and came, flooding his tongue with her sweet release, making him crazy as she whispered his name.

Kyle lifted her off and rearranged her on the bed, stroking her still twitching body, nuzzling against her neck. She captured his head in her hands and kissed him wildly, groaning as their tongues met.

"I can...taste..." She breathed the broken words into his mouth and he smiled against her lips.

"You taste your cream. It's very good, isn't it?"

"Hmm." She kissed him again, softer this time, before nipping his lower lip and retreating. "Now, how about you?"

He grinned. "If you insist."

El met his eyes and smiled before focusing her attention on his groin. Everything he had stood up and paid attention. When her hand wrapped around his girth, his breath caught. As her thumb smeared through the liquid on the top

of his shaft, rubbing it in a circle until the head glistened--his brain no longer registered anything but sensation.

El bent over, her beautiful body on display as she leaned at right angles to him. The tip of her tongue darted out and contacted the head of his cock and he forced himself to keep his hips on the mattress and not thrust between her lips.

Another twirl of her tongue around the head, a slow, even swipe along the underside. Each movement she made tormented him in such an amazing way he couldn't imagine anything feeling better. Until she engulfed him with her mouth and tried to swallow him whole.

"Holy mackerel. Arhhhhh..." His head fell back on the pillow, fingers convulsing against the sheets as he forced himself to hold back and let her have her way. It was a big step for her to take, and like sneaking up on a tiny mouse, he didn't want...*damn*...to do anything that...*fuck*...broke her...concentration.

Long wet slide. Swirl of the tongue. Long wet slide, wicked suction. Long wet slide.

He was in heaven, and not even the rising strains of "Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow" floating in the window made him lose focus. She rolled his balls in her fingers, tightened her suction around his cock, and the buzzing in his ears grew louder than the caroling. Seconds away from...

"Sweetheart, you want to back off? Or you're gonna get a little icing with that candy cane."

El stared at him from under her lashes, the same

mischievous look she'd given him back in the lingerie shop, and he knew he was a goner. She dragged back once more, cheeks hollowing with her efforts as she slipped her fingers under his balls and pressed.

"Holy..." His voice trailed off as the music swelled around them, his nuts tight to his body. He spilled into her mouth, his seed pouring out in seemingly endless spurts. El swallowed and gulped, and swallowed some more. She licked his length and worked him until every last jerk had died away and he was nothing but a quivering mass of relaxed cat. She gave his cock one last naughty kiss before crawling up the bed and draping herself on top him, her lips hovering over his.

She kissed him softly, and this time it was his pleasure he tasted. A shiver traced his skin. It was very, very intimate, and suddenly the strange and eerie path he had entered by getting involved with El grew even more foreign.

Oral sex wasn't supposed to make him feel like this.

"Thank you." She brushed their cheeks together before resting her head on his chest. Kyle wrapped an arm around her back, adjusting until her warmth covered him in all the right places. He wondered what the hell he had gotten himself into.

\* \* \*

"Have you had enough to eat? I've got more ham and eggs, and there's toast and--"

Kyle leaned back in his chair and adjusted his belt.

"Ma'am, that was an incredible breakfast. And like yesterday, and the day before, I have eaten enough to last me a week. Thank you, no." He held up a hand to block the heavily loaded platter heading his direction down the table again.

Mrs. Scott beamed at him. "I don't want you to go hungry, now. Actually, I'm trying to butter you up because I have a favor to ask. There are a few little chores I need help with, if you don't mind. Some shopping in town I haven't managed to finish."

He wiped his mouth quickly and took advantage of the fact El's mouth was full. "We'd love to go. So good to be able to help you out."

El groaned lightly beside him, and he kicked her ankle. For the past three days he'd been trying to get into town. And for the past three days he'd been stuck back at the house in the admittedly entertaining company of the younger Scotts as El's mom and dad rallied the family to get ready for the holidays. He'd spent some time online with his current CSI project doing research, but that had only taken a few hours each day. Once he was done, he'd given himself over to the enchanting interaction with El's family. Distracting the little boys while their parents wrapped and hid presents was fun. As the youngest himself, he'd never experienced the adoration of little guys, and there were at least a half dozen tykes, all of whom seemed to delight in hiding in corners and waiting until the opportune moment to leap out and tackle him.

Then there were the twins. That was comical as well, since the first morning on his way upstairs after breakfast he'd overheard them discussing him as "El's guy" and labeling him off limits. Of course, they'd failed to let El in on their decision, and still trailed after him in their sultry way. He ignored them as best he could, but seeing how El reacted to him reacting to *their* acting made him laugh.

Shortly afterward he found himself riding shotgun again in a borrowed pickup truck.

El grumbled. "I thought you had more computer work to do."

Kyle smiled out the front window, admiring the decorations on the buildings as they drove into town. The Scotts weren't the only ones to go a trifle overboard with the "wrapping it up for the holidays" look. He shook his head and paid attention to answering El's question. There were a few pieces of the puzzle he'd found for his latest assignment, but he was still missing the important key players. Until he discovered those, he couldn't make a move. None of this he could tell her, since she thought he was some kind of online graphic designer. "I haven't done much but work for the past couple days."

"And play with my brothers. Sorry about that."

Kyle snorted. "Don't be. I'm having a blast."

El put the truck into park and looked at him closely, curiosity in her eyes. She opened her mouth as if to speak, then shook her head. "Come on. My mom gave us an impossible task."

The list was as long as his arm. Seemed the Scotts didn't believe in skimping on Christmas presents--like that surprised him any. What did surprise him was the warm glow inside he'd felt ever since setting eyes on their girl. The glow that hadn't diminished since she'd first led him on, and now three days after arriving at Santa's Little Shop of Horrors, he was amazed at how much he was enjoying himself. This not-really-protective-custody wasn't a bad thing, not when it involved a mother intent on feeding him at every opportunity, a father with a rather liberal hand with the scotch and a warm cat in his bed at night.

"Lead me on, Eloise Inez," he teased as they made their way down the sidewalk.

She spun and planted her fists on her hips, icily glaring down at him. "My name is El."

He snorted. "Course it is, gingersnap. It's just after hearing your ma and pa--"

"Not Eloise. Not Eloise Inez. El. Oh, and not sugar bear or cuddlecakes or sugarplum, or any of the other saccharinely sweet names you've been calling me," she snarled, even as she grabbed his hand and tugged him down the street.

Kyle couldn't remember the last time he'd had this much fun. Had to be--he laughed to himself--a coon's age.

El dragged his willing body down the main street of town. She hadn't lied when she said she grew up in Podunk, Backwoods. People smiled and waved at them, standing in small groups and chatting, opening the



gatherings to invite them in to "visit for a spell." El smiled sweetly at them all, and gave nice noncommittal answers even as she told them nothing vital about him.

He stopped her before they entered the toy shop, tugging her into the dormer at the side of the old false fronted building. "It seems as if we've met most of the people in town. I thought you needed to keep me under wraps?"

She raised her brow again, and all kinds of tingles, none having to do with the crisp air temperatures, waved over him. "You never heard of the purloined letter? I've introduced you as Kyle. They all said 'oh' and moved on to the next topic. By making you boring and uninteresting we've hidden you as well as if we'd tried to go underground."

He sniffed at her. "Boring and uninteresting. Sheesh, I've obviously got to work a little harder."

El softened, glancing around clandestinely before leaning into his arms. "You're fishing for compliments."

"Of course I am. My ego needs to be fed as much as my belly."

She thumped her fist on his chest, even as she smiled. "My mother is feeding your belly just fine."

He tweaked her nose. "So it's my poor ego that's feeling neglected. Sleeping all night long with a sexy shifter who doesn't let me make the bubble lights bubble when she's near? I'm a devastated cat."

El sighed, frowning even as she stared at his mouth.

"Give me a little more time, okay? It's not like we're back in my apartment. Thinking about having sex under my parents roof is a very weird sensation for me, even if it is normal and okay, and nothing unusual for most cat shifters."

Kyle cleared his throat. Snuggling with her at night, and kissing, and getting each other off had been a ton of fun, but they'd failed to actually *do the deed* yet. There had been no chance to hear the sleigh bells ring, melt the snowmen or whatever. Partly because now that the boys knew he was in the house, they had no reticence about bounding into El's room at the most inopportune moments.

"Actually, I do understand your hesitation. I bet that's part of the reason most cat shifters move out so young. I doubt I could have sex at my uncle and aunt's either." He shuddered, and she laughed.

"Yeah, there's something about doing the nasty on their turf that..." Her reaction wrinkled her entire face into the most adorable grimace.

Of course, he was all for finding a hotel room, but in the interest of remaining healthy and vertical, he refrained from suggesting that one.

She had a damn good right hook.

Instead, he laughed, tilting her chin. "Look, we have a weird situation to start with, oh ye of the sexy tushie. So let's not worry about what we've not done and get through this list before we find ourselves having to hijack Santa's sleigh to get all the things your folks want for your little bros."

Shopping was domestic and non-exciting and...he loved

every minute of it. At least until he had to make a pit stop. The restroom doors were wrapped in shiny paper and ribbons, with the words "Elves" and "Pixies" to choose from. He actually had to peek in to discover which one had the urinals.

When he finally returned to where he'd left El, she wasn't alone.

She was nose to nose with a hulking dark-skinned giant. Loosely congregated around them, a half dozen other shaggy-haired men casually loitered, and Kyle increased his pace, ducking through the milling crowds. The scent on the air screamed wolf.

Then the giant grabbed El and planted his lips on hers, and Kyle's vision got a trifle hazy. He snarled out a warning and the path cleared, humans between him and his prey falling aside like fir trees in a Christmas tree lot in November. One of the pack stepped in his way, and he simply pressed the man to the floor with a hand, using his forward momentum to fly over top of a display unit and tackle the guy mauling El to the ground. Unfortunately, that meant El went as well, but Kyle twisted them as they fell, ensuring the lupine ended up on the bottom. A rattling gasp escaped the wolf as the full weight of their two bodies slammed into him hard.

El threw out a hand toward the rest of the pack that instantly surrounded them. "Wait. Don't do anything stupid. Sam is fine. No need to rip out any throats." She peeled herself off the pile of bodies and scrambled to her feet. The

next thing he knew she smacked his shoulder. Hard.

"Kyle, what the hell are you doing?"

Kyle thought for a moment. "Is this some kind of a trick question? Christmas shopping." Her gaze narrowed and she knelt beside him, pointing to his hand. Kyle gasped in mock surprise. "My goodness, what *am* I doing?"

The wolf's eyes bulged, the whites showing red-tinged. Kyle had his hand wrapped around the shifter's throat, pinning him effortlessly to the ground. Of course, part of the effortlessness was because Kyle still sat on the beast, all his weight centered directly over the wolf's gut. Any energy his target had went into breathing and not into trying to escape.

Sudden pain gripped Kyle. He meekly let his quarry free, attempting to stay as close as possible to El and the death grip she had on his ear. She tugged again, peeling him off the wolf, who instantly rolled to this belly and dragged in a huge gasp of air.

El yanked one last time to get Kyle to face her before releasing his aching ear.

"What happened to staying quiet as a kitten? You dumb-ass," she hissed at him *sotto voce*.

"He was touching you." The words leapt from his lips before his brain engaged.

She rolled her eyes and buried her fingers in her hair, tugging the locks into an unruly mess. "Great. More macho shit, just what we needed." She leaned closer. "You will not say another word while I try to fix this, got it?"

He batted his eyes innocently and then folded in two to cradle his belly. Fuck, her right hook was getting stronger, and she was deadly accurate when it came to hitting his solar plexus. "Got it," he squeezed out.

EI stepped around him. "Hey, Samuel, sorry about that. My friend's a little shaky from all the sugar--you know, cats on a holiday high and all that."

The wolf had gotten to his feet and now glared in Kyle's direction. "Sure. We'll accept that as an excuse this time." The rest of his boys circled in behind him. "I'm serious, EI, it's good to see you again. You're looking mighty fine."

*You're looking mighty fine.* Blah, blah, blah. The "I want to get into your pants" tone of the wolf's voice was all too familiar. Kyle had used it too many times himself not to recognize it.

EI folded her arms in front of her. "Thanks, but like I said before, I don't think you should be kissing me. We're not a couple anymore."

"We could be," Samuel growled, his voice low and dripping with intention. Kyle's fingers itched to return to the man's neck. His own grumble of dissatisfaction escaped, and EI butted him with her hip.

"But we're not. And haven't been for a long time." She raised her gaze and nodded to the rest of them. "Hey, guys. How's it going? Y'all coming out to the party this weekend?"

A pack of animated wolves in a toy store was a scary sight. Grown men though they were, they almost vibrated with excitement. "You bet, Eloise," one piped up. "Your

family makes the best damn hooch--"

An elbow in the ribs cut him short. "Ix-nay on the ooch-hay in ublic-pay"

"Oh, right."

The rumble of voices as the pack chatted excitedly at El smeared together into white noise. Kyle had his eyes locked on the leader, Samuel, and the man was equally focused on him. The wolf's gaze darted between him and El, suspicion and jealousy on his face. Kyle snuck out a hand to cup her waist, just to yank the other guy's chain. El didn't even realize that as she spoke, she settled unconsciously against Kyle's body, her long frame nestled intimately close.

Samuel looked as if Kyle had stolen his favorite bone.

Kyle wondered for a second what the freak *was* going on. He wasn't supposed to feel protective toward El. Cats didn't. Not this cat anyway. Prowl, howl and get the hell out--that had always been his motto when it came to relationships. But somewhere along the long bike ride to the land of endless Christmas carols, he seemed to have lost his mind.

He was dragged from his internal debating by El's firm grip, and brought back into the December sunshine, his arms piled high with bags from their purchases. He glanced around to spot the wolves, but they were long gone.

"What am I supposed to do with you?" El shook her head in disappointment.

"I have a few suggestions--"

She stomped on his foot. "Don't even start with me, bucko. It was bad enough I had to issue a personal invitation to Ranger Bob and his posse to the Christmas party to make sure things didn't get out of hand after your little display of uber Alphahood. Don't push your luck."

*Christmas party.* He'd heard those words an awful lot lately, yet only now did they register. "Christmas party?"

She piled the bags from his arms into the back of the truck they'd borrowed to come to town. "Party. As in the yearly Scotts' booze-it-up-and-get-down Christmas bash. It's a tradition around here. The whole town is usually invited." She tossed him the keys and he couldn't stop the grin that burst to his face. "I can hardly wait to find out how nicely in control you're going to be at that event."





## Chapter Five

What she was seeing was impossible. Her family, the one voted by her high school yearbook committee as "the most likely to put a sloth to sleep" (other than their ability to use massive levels of electricity every December and brew moonshine that could power a nuclear sub), was hosting the premier event of the Christmas season.

El nabbed her mother's arm as she raced past, a glittering tiara slightly askew on her elaborate hair-do. "Mom? Umm, you said the party this year was simply the same old, same old."

Her mother adjusted her girdle, smiling with delight at the filling front room. "It is, dear. Just the townsfolk--oh, and a few new friends of your father's." She leaned conspiratorially close. "Some of whom are simply going out of their minds trying to figure out how your father made his winnings do so well in the stock market. No matter how often he tells them, they keep insisting there must be more."

El rubbed her temples. "Face it, Mom, it's tough to believe that using a random number generator and a set of darts turned you into multimillionaires, but hey." She pointed around the room. "It happened."

"That's what we said. Now, where's that nice young man of yours?" Mrs. Scott beamed as she patted El's cheek. Her gaze darted to the side. "Oh dear, the children are in the punch again."

She kissed El and scurried off, flustered like always, and just like always, El had to smile. Yeah, the guest list was a little broader, but other than that it didn't seem as if her parents were making anything more of the party than usual. The punch bowl looked to be made of real crystal, and there were lily-white suited servers wandering through the teeming crowd, but she still smelled eggnog and homemade gingersnaps.

A set of warm lips pressed against her cheek and Kyle's make-her-weak-in-the-knees scent surrounded her.

"What's that smile for?" he whispered in her ear.

"Hmm, I'm thinking that maybe family isn't the worst thing that's ever happened to me." She turned to smile at him and got hit with the full impact of cat shifter in a formal tux.

*Raw.*

Long lean torso, his broad shoulders nicely filling the jacket, and the dark charcoal contrasting perfectly with the crisp white of his shirt. Deadly sharp creases graced the pants. A slick part to his hair, and the rest of the gorgeous blond locks loose around his shoulders.

*Do not drool. Do not drool.*

"Hey." She cleared her throat and dragged her gaze back to his eyes. His amusement shone through. Yeah, he'd caught her admiring him. Oh well, maybe that wasn't a bad thing. She winked. "You clean up nice."

"Thank you. I can say the same of you. I love that dress. I love the color." He stroked his fingertips along the sweetheart neckline, warmth stealing from his fingers and

making her blood pound. He stepped a little closer and spoke into her ear again. "Are you wearing the red undies I bought you?"

There was a buzz in her ears as she fought to loosen her tongue. A commotion rose by the front door, and El leaned against him to peer over his shoulder. A massive group of reporters poured in, oversized cameras at the ready. El's heart dropped to her toes.

Media. Oh great. What was that line the chief had used again? *Relative obscurity*. So much for that idea. Kyle's location would be common knowledge in a few minutes if someone spotted him during a live broadcast. She grabbed him by the belt and ducked toward the stairs.

"El, what--"

"Don't talk. Just smile and move your ass. Work with me, okay?" He shrugged and followed her up the staircase, his hand now in hers. "Slow down a little. It's okay, we don't want them to notice us. Stay cool, stay ordinary."

Kyle spotted the new group crowding the front of the house. "Shit, is that CNN and NBC?"

"Yup, and I think that's ABC." Cursing didn't help ease her frustration much. El couldn't leave the party, not for a while. She'd invited the wolf pack, and while Samuel would make sure they behaved, if she didn't put in an appearance there would be questions asked. She saw no other solution. Once she tucked Kyle safely away, she'd work the party for a bit, then rescue him.

From the upper landing, El led him down a long hallway,

shoved open the nursery door and gestured him in.

"Welcome to your new party room for the night."

He grumbled for all of four seconds before being surrounded by the youngest Scotts, who had all been fed and watered before the festive event.

"Kyle! You gonna play w'd us?"

"Tell us another story..."

El patted him on the back sympathetically, her hand pausing as if magnetically connected to his solid muscles. "I'm sorry to have to hide you away last minute like this, but Mom is notorious about keeping her babies safe. There's no way anyone is getting into this room without permission."

Kyle sat on the floor, his gorgeous tux quickly covered in cat hair as two of the littlest shifted in their excitement and crawled over his lap. "Oh, yeah, this is all peachy. I don't mind a bit."

She stared in consternation. He sounded far too compliant. "Kyle, please--you're not thinking of doing anything rash?"

"Of course not, I'm as innocent as a kitten, I am." He glanced around. "Who's officially in charge of these rugrats? I can't imagine your mom left them alone unsupervised."

Delilah and Darlene wandered around the corner, flicked on their brilliant smiles, and suddenly the whole situation made El even unhappier. Maybe this wasn't the best solution after all. Maybe she didn't have to put in an

appearance.

"Don't worry, Kyle, we'll take good care of you." Delilah winked prettily at him, and El's tummy fell farther.

"Yeah, El, we've got it under control," Darlene said. "You should probably be getting back down to the party. I heard Samuel asking for you earlier, when I went down to grab some munchies for the critters."

El flushed at the expression in Kyle's eyes. "Samuel is simply a guest like any other." Then, flustered, she hurried to the door and escaped.

\* \* \*

Kyle watched the door close behind her and bit back the string of swear words that would have totally gotten him on Santa's naughty list.

"You look like you just got handed a speeding ticket," Delilah teased.

Kyle stood, arms still wrapped around the couple of younger ones who refused to let him go. "Tell me there's a way to check out the dance floor."

There was a solid tug on his pant leg and he looked down into the mischievous eyes of the five year old who'd been his best confidante over the previous days. "You want to watch the par-tay? I knows where you kin look from and nobodies will see you."

Darlene's soft voice broke in. "Only you would be safest in your cougar form. Even if someone did take your picture, none of the press are very good at identifying us in our

shifter forms."

Kyle stared at her. "That's a brilliant idea. So brilliant, in fact, I'm not even going to ask how you came to the conclusion I don't want any pictures taken. Because you're certainly too old to be eavesdropping at doors like your little brothers." Darlene had the grace to blush as he handed the little one in his arms to her. "I'll go change in the back room."

The twins' synchronized complaints made him laugh, and he waved them off as he strode away. El's family made him consider his own relatives. While he'd always enjoyed his brothers' company, his uncle and aunt had been too rigid, far too uptight for his liking. Kyle shifted forms and padded back into the playroom, suddenly stuck by the fact it was nearly ten years since he'd last seen his guardians. He gave a mental shrug. Jake and Conner he kept in touch with via email, and they were doing well. The clan was still strong. In the big picture, that was all that mattered.

In a few moments a small rag-tag bunch of kids, and Kyle, clustered together at the top of a high landing, peering down at the main room through thin railings.

Kyle lay flat on the floor, his cat body low to the ground with two small bodies tucked tight to his side. El's oldest brother, Edmund, whispered in his ear as he pointed people out.

"Holy cow--that's why all the media showed up. There's the Vice President. Look! And I think that guy is with Apple, and that's the CEO of DreamWorks."

Kyle nodded slowly. There were so many bodies in the room he was having a hard time finding--

"There's EI. Oops. That's her old boyfriend, Samuel." Edmund leaned close and whispered even softer. "He smells like a dog when he gets caught in the rain."

Kyle watched intently. From his vantage point he saw Samuel closing in on where EI stood chatting animatedly with a couple of important-looking women. Every nerve in his body went on high alert. There was no way he was going to lie there and watch that guy bother EI. Not because EI was anything...special, but...it was a party, and she deserved to be able to enjoy it without being harassed by wolves who didn't know the meaning of the word *no*.

Good enough excuse for now.

He batted Edmund back toward the nursery with a gentle paw, and only after making sure the kids were safely tucked away did he slink down the stairs.

It only took a few minutes to make it to the kitchen without being spotted. Not that he would be too noticeable--Darlene was right--there were shifters everywhere at the party, in both their human and animal forms, and no one blinked an eye at the furies wandering the room. He used his teeth to snatch a uniform from the pile stashed by the serving door, slipped behind a door to shift and dress as quickly as possible before grabbing a tray of canapes and heading out to the party.

He wove his way steadily toward EI, who now stood beside the far windows, her back to the room as she spoke

intently with someone. The someone, as he got closer, turned out to be Samuel, and Kyle bit down his growl of disgust. Raising the tray over his head to block his face from easy view, he bore down on the couple.

And tripped.

Dainty mushrooms on toothpicks, bacon wrapped scallops and miniature quiches flew every which way as he slammed into the wolf for the second time in as many days. The happy sound of laughter dimmed around him and just as a flash went off, the brilliant red of El's dress swirled in front of his face as she squatted next to him and Samuel.

Hmm, she smelled good. Not even the stink of wolf distracted him from noticing.

Samuel sighed mightily. "We really have got to stop meeting like this."

Kyle snorted, the wolf grinned and El dragged them both to their feet. Kyle kept his head low and away from the cameras. El's powerful grip wrapped around his forearm and yanked him rapidly toward the open door of the balcony, which he ducked through gratefully, hiding himself in the shadows to the side.

Well, that had gone well. *Not.*

He peered in the window, but no one seemed interested anymore in the clumsy waiter. A very efficient team cleaned up the mess, and the party went back to normal. Except now he was on the balcony peering in and unable to go anywhere.

*Shit, good one. Way to think with your dick.*



He watched as El shook her head at Samuel. The wolf shrugged and gestured. Suddenly the entire pack joined them, and Kyle pressed his nose desperately against the window. Screw hiding. If El needed him, he was going to be in there faster than a tot on the presents Christmas morning.

Samuel wagged his fingers in his direction, a taunting little-girl move, and Kyle snarled. The bastard knew he was out here. What the hell was El telling the wolf? Moments later the pack, along with their leader, sauntered away and El visibly relaxed. Right before she turned her gaze on the window he stood behind and narrowed her eyes into dangerously thin slits.

*Oops.*

\* \* \*

"You look pretty damn gorgeous in that dress."

El glared at him. Not even sweet talk delivered in his incredibly sexy tone of voice was going to get him out of this one. "What part of *stay put* didn't you understand?"

"I'm...sorry." He shrugged lightly and some of her bluster slipped away. "You're right. I didn't help matters by coming downstairs."

El paced across the balcony and shook her head. Damn. She'd managed to keep the media away, but only by giving the wolf pack what they'd been angling to achieve ever since she broke up with Sam. She glanced over the

railing to watch the guys arranging the fireworks display in the yard and Samuel running a loving hand over the seat of the souped-up Harley. She tried to hide her sniff, but Kyle joined her, wrapping his arm around her waist as he peered down.

"What is he up to?"

"Diversion. There will be plenty for the boys with cameras to take pictures of in a moment."

"Not the fireworks." He pointed at Samuel. "That." He leaned over the railing and shouted angrily. "Hey. Hey Fido, get your hands off--"

El slammed her hand over his mouth. "It's okay."

Kyle shook himself free. Samuel glanced up at them and waved saucily before throwing a leg over the seat and starting her up. "He's taking your bike? What the hell is going on?"

She tilted her head from side to side. "Well, strictly speaking, it's his bike. I...kinda took it when we broke up."

Kyle snorted, leaning back on the railing. "You stole his bike? How long ago was that?"

"Seven years, right before I left for the academy."

"Classic."

El licked her lips and figured the smile on her face was pretty sheepish. "He was damn upset, and every time I've come home he tried to sweet-talk me into returning her. Only as long as I said no, he couldn't do anything because of some kind of pack rules that says it was a gift...Whatever."

Kyle grabbed her by the wrist and positioned her between his legs. The white server's uniform fit on the tight side, and he didn't look nearly as suave as he had in the tux, but she still found him incredibly attractive.

He nuzzled her neck, his hands warm on her lower back. "Did you do that because of me?"

*Shit.* "Yeah. Well, no and yeah. I let him think I was stuck, and had to give it back. That way he can get some mileage gloating down at the pack house--I owed him that after all these years. But I intended on returning it this Christmas anyway. I have enough saved for one of my own."

Kyle led her carefully toward a bench along the far edge of the balcony. The sky was dark, only trickles of twilight clinging to the far horizon visible through the trees. It was going to be a spectacular night for the party, and now that she'd bolted the door, they should have a little privacy.

She needed a break, and sucking back anymore of her father's triple-dosed rum-punch wasn't the way to stay in control.

Kyle twisted her around until she straddled him, the slinky edges of her skirt rising and exposing skin to his touch. He rested his open hands on her thighs. "I'm sorry." He repeated.

He drew slow circles on her legs with his thumbs and she swallowed hard. He started at her knees and spiraled inward--slow, steady, intoxicating. She tried to concentrate. "Sorry for what?"

"For everything. For making you have to deal with me on

top of your new family situation at the holiday times. For being a twit and not staying hidden. For making you have to give the mangy beast his bike back even a moment early."

She laughed, then gasped to silence. He kissed the side of her neck while his fingers traced the inside of her thigh. The delicate movements teased the very lacy, and almost nonexistent, edge of the not-very-there panties she wore.

"Those are the ones I bought." His voice was ultra low, a purr against her eardrums and the goose bumps stood and saluted along her spine. Back and forth, his finger traced, his thumb dashing down the centerline of the gusset and pressing on her clit. "You're wet, El."

*No shit.* "Ummm..."

He kissed her, his mouth covering hers like a blessing. One hand cupped her neck and held her in place and his tongue invaded her mouth. Swooping and looping, driving the air from her lungs. At the same time he pressed more slowly, a small steady circle over her clit and she moaned into his mouth. Okay, all was forgiven. In fact she couldn't remember what she'd even had to be mad about. Especially when he slid his fingers under the flimsy fabric and caressed her folds.

It was dark enough that only the faint light shining out the floor-to-ceiling windows lit them, and that didn't provide much illumination. But when he broke off the kiss and leaned back, she knew what was on his face. Lust, need, driving hunger. All the things she was sure showed in her body and face.

He pressed a digit into her core and she groaned softly. The white of his teeth flashed in the soft glow. "We've waited for long enough. Right now, there's no one but you and me."

Thrust, thrust, again and again into her sensitive core. His fingers stroked the front wall of her passage and it felt incredible. She dropped her head on his shoulder and waited for the fireworks. And between his relentless touch and the sweet words, the dirty talk he whispered in her ear, the wait wasn't long.

"I'm going to fuck you. Slip my cock into you and drive hard. Make your body buzz for attention, your breasts, your pretty little clit." As he named her clit he brushed it and the first explosion went off. Fast. Hard. Pulsing her core so she clenched around his finger and refused to release him.

Before her body stopped shaking she was airborne, being taken back against the cold wall of the balcony, the solid brickwork chilly against her skin. With the heat raging through her, she barely noticed. He yanked one shoulder strap off and peeled back the fabric to reveal the demitasse bra she wore.

"Sweet mercy, woman. Hmm." His mouth locked onto her nipple before she spoke a word. He suckled through the material, pulses of fire shooting from his lips to her core and extending her fading orgasm. She contorted her hands behind her to undo zippers, helping bare herself to the waist. When he pressed her arms overhead and locked her wrists to the wall, she bit her lip to keep from screaming.

She'd waited far too long for this. For a cat who knew how to tease. Knew what she wanted, and was willing to give it to her. In spite of being on her parent's outrageously large balcony, or maybe because of it, she'd never been so turned on before in her life.

Kyle kept her arms locked overhead and bent to worship her naked breasts, one side, then the other. He swirled his tongue around the nipple, drawing it to a tight peak and then blowing. The cool night air made the tip ache. She wanted to reach down and trail her fingers through his hair, wanted to touch his broad shoulders and the strong line of his jaw. All she was allowed was to soak in her own sensual torture, and it was amazing.

He stepped back slightly and peeled off the white jacket, ripping off the tight shirt underneath to expose the glorious expanse of his chest. She reached out and pressed her palms against him and he rumbled, slipping closer so she could trace the outline of his abs, smooth her fingertips over his firm chest and strong shoulders.

"I want you. So bad. You wanna go all the way?"

El snapped off his pants button and tore open the zipper, catching his naked cock as it sprang out. She stoked his hard flesh with one hand as she shoved at the pants with the other. *Thank you, Santa--*as shifters, they didn't need condoms to stop disease, and she was protected against pregnancy. *Was she willing? Oh man...* "Now. I need you now."

Kyle didn't wait for another invitation. He stepped closer,

catching her under the leg and lifting her knee high. Her back pressed into the wall behind her, the bricks icy against her heated skin. Kyle yanked her panties to one side. The string snapped and they both laughed for a second, smiling at each other. Then his cock was at her entrance, and their smiles froze as they both experienced fully that first slide together.

He stretched her, his hard girth opening her tender passage. A small rock at a time, he inched his way in. Behind his back, the first of the fireworks rose into the air--a swirling stream of light. From above their heads, voices rang out from the second balcony. The higher level meant a better view of the show, yet there was nothing happening out in the field that could distract from what Kyle was doing to her right here. And when he was finally firmly planted all the way to the root they both let out a sigh of relief.

"So long in coming."

"Feels so freaking good." El leaned her head back on the wall and squeezed her internal muscles, just to feel the fullness. To know he really was there.

Another light exploded in the sky, and another. The sounds of rock music rang out as the pack put on the show. Kyle put on his own performance, dragging out slowly, then slamming in again. His elbow supported her knee, opening her wide to his invasion. He bent his knees to gain leverage and the angle changed.

"Oh, yeah, right there." El clutched Kyle's shoulders, clinging for dear life as he maximized his thrusts, driving

her against the wall, spearing into her. Tingling pressure increased, the feel of being taken by him so good, so powerful. He snuck his hand between their torsos and pressed on her clit in time with his thrusts, in time with the echoing beat of the music in the background. A starburst opened above them, and another, and then Kyle swore because she was coming, her passage so tight around him he was nearly locked in place.

"El, oh El..." Kyle's whole body jerked as he climaxed, releasing into her, his seed hot and wet and delightfully dirty as the lights in the deep black sky were gasped at by the crowds above them.

It felt as if they were gasping at Kyle and her, and the marvel of it made her go off again. Kyle lowered her leg and leaned heavily against her, his torso shaking, hers shivering with continued reaction. Their breathing remained erratic, unsteady. El cupped his cheek and turned his face toward hers and kissed him, their bodies still joined. He kissed her back, gentler now, hands stroking and easing her with such tenderness she thought something inside might break and pour out.

A final display of explosives lit the night sky, and loud cheers rose into the air.

Kyle chuckled. "It was rather praiseworthy, wasn't it?"

They laughed together, and El thought the night was possibly the best she'd had in her entire life.





## Chapter Six

Kyle peeked around the corner of the door, his fingers meshed through El's. She checked the other direction, and suddenly he had the violent urge to hum the theme song from a *007* movie.

"Clear?"

She shushed him. "There's a group to our left, but if you keep your face down and we move immediately to the staircase, we should be good. Go around the back way until we get to my room."

"Done."

He cracked the door a bit wider and she slipped through, with him right on her tail. So to speak. He had his chin tucked tight to his chest, glancing out his peripheral vision and trying to keep his torso facing the wall.

Of course that's when the party of people descending the stairs spotted El.

"Eloise Inez! Yoo hoo! There's someone I'd like you to meet!" Mrs. Scott's timing was impeccably bad as usual. Almost as bad as when she'd opened the door the previous day and he'd just slipped his hand out of El's pants while they were digging through the pantry.

El swore, yanking her fingers from his in a flash. She whispered hasty instructions. "Keep walking. Maybe they'll think you're some of the hired help." When she turned to face the party guests, he stepped behind her.

And came face to face with his uncle.

Amazing how many different tangents managed to simultaneously race through his mind. While silently calling down curses in a dozen languages, Kyle flicked a rapid glance out around the party room. It was clear that, so far, there wasn't a lot of attention directed their way. Even as that information made its way into his brain, he had time to notice his uncle had aged well. Like most shifters, Uncle Roy still looked young, but there were additional lines marring the corners of his eyes, and a heavy, almost disgusted look crossed his face as he recognized his nephew.

Yup. Shit, meet fan.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Uncle Roy snarled, his gaze darting back and forth between El and Kyle. He sniffed and swore. "Great Scott, you've got some nerve. Taking advantage of a girl during her family's Christmas party." His uncle flicked the collar of the misfitting uniform Kyle had hastily dragged on after the little balcony interlude. "I see you've found a suitable job for your skill level. Or..." He narrowed his eyes. "You'd better not even think about using this as an opportunity to case the place for a future opportunity to make some easy cash."

Mrs. Scott's group had descended to the landing and she stepped into the fray. Her nose wrinkled, she eyed Kyle with dismay. "Whatever are you doing, dear? Is this some kind of a joke? I'm sure we had already hired enough help-- you didn't need to feel you had to step in."

The arrival of Mr. Scott was the icing on the fruitcake. He stalked around the group in his massive cat body, butting his head between people until he circled once around El, once around Kyle. He then sat and glared at Kyle.

*Shit.* While a cougar's sense of smell wasn't as keen as other shifters', like the damn wolves', it was far better than your average human's. At that moment Kyle suspected El's father knew exactly what the two of them had been up to during the fireworks.

El slipped next to her mom and spoke quietly. "Why is Daddy in his cougar form?"

Mrs. Scott sighed. "There were a couple of reporters bothering him. He said he was tempted to bite them, so he shifted." Kyle stared in dismay. "Oh, don't worry," she reassured him. "He never bites humans while in this form. It's actually safer he shifted."

"Mrs. Scott, I take it you know this miscreant of a nephew of mine?" Uncle Roy's hand shot out and manhandled Kyle to the side before he could brace himself. He tugged himself free.

"Good to see you again too, *sir*," Kyle growled.

Voices rang out, people returning from the fireworks display drawing closer to see what the commotion was. El tried to quiet the crowd, making sure she stayed between him and her father, whose tail twitched ominously. Right now, Kyle figured he was pretty much dirt in her daddy's eyes.

Uncle Roy tugged the front of his shirt again and Kyle got

mad. He slapped the man's hands away. "Do you mind? If you'd like to speak to me, then speak. Stop trying to jerk me around like I'm ten years old."

His uncle stared at him. "Fine. I want to know what the hell you're doing here. I thought you were out on the coast. I didn't expect to find you acting as a damn servant for a nouveau riche family. It doesn't look good. If you need money, you know all you have to do is ask."

"I don't need your money, I--"

"It's not my money, it's the family's money, and if you'd have contacted us anytime in the past years you'd know that. Damn it, boy, what kind of mischief have you gotten yourself into?"

"Respectfully, sir, my life is none of your damn business."

Kyle shouldered past his uncle, harder than he needed to. Uncle Roy slammed a hand down on his shoulder and dragged him close. Nose to nose.

"You don't want to try yourself against me. I may be old but I've still got what it takes to lead the clans."

Kyle snorted. "You never had what it takes to understand me. Now lay off."

"No, not until I find out what your intentions are here."

Mrs. Scott's voice rang out. "Mr. Branegan, I'm not sure what the trouble is. Kyle and El are simply good friends. Let them be." She stood to the side and smiled innocently. She whispered a little more softly, as if sharing secrets between the three of them, "I don't think it's our business as parents

to ask questions of a personal nature, do you?"

Kyle's uncle cleared his throat. "Ma'am, I think it's of *vital* importance to find out what kind of relationship our children have. I find it highly suspicious that the first time I see my nephew in almost ten years is at your home, especially since you've said your daughter has also been out from under the family wing for nearly a year."

El had given up on keeping attention off the chaos. She stepped over to Kyle's side. "What are you insinuating?"

Uncle Roy sneered. "Knowing my nephew's reputation, it's possible you're simply a pawn in his game to find an easier life. Then again, maybe you're in the ploy as well, and you're both planning on taking advantage of your parents' innocence when it comes to money matters."

"You think...you think Kyle and I are trying to steal money from my parents? That's ridiculous. How much of my father's eggnog have you had, sir?" El's natural reluctance to make a scene and her need to try to follow orders seemed to have lost the battle to her temper.

Damn, she was smoking when she was pissed.

El leaned in farther, right in Uncle Roy's face. "And who are you anyway to come in here and try to order us around? Maybe you need to get the hell out of this party."

The cougar-that-was-her-father padded forward, his tail in full twitch mode, head low as he stalked Uncle Roy. Kyle added together all the puzzle pieces and came up with a bit of a mess. His uncle bristled, the power of his shifter side flaring with his anger. Kyle leapt. He landed in front of El

and her father, and glared his uncle down. No, they'd never seen eye to eye, but there was something very suspicious about Uncle Roy's behavior. It was as if he was *trying* to pick a fight. With the number of people in the room, of all levels of authority, human and shifters, this wasn't the time or place for a power struggle. Papa Scott snarled, his roar of displeasure echoing off the walls of the suddenly quiet room. The voices faded, but Kyle was busy standing up to his uncle. The man was strong, but since Kyle was fully grown, his own authority was more than enough to keep his feet. A few of the closer shifters weren't as fortunate, backing off the display of power streaming out from them both.

"You want to challenge me, son?"

"I'm not your son, and I don't want your job for the world. Jake can have it, it's his responsibility, not mine."

Uncle Roy leaned closer. "And what is your responsibility, Kyle? To wander the world and mooch off people? Or do you have more despicable goals?"

"Enough," Kyle shouted as Papa Scott simultaneously growled in warning.

Unless something happened, and quick, this was not going to end pretty. Whatever stick Uncle Roy had up his butt, there was no easy way to wipe away the public insults he'd just made against El. And with Uncle Roy the ranking cougar, her reputation, and the Scott family's, could be in tatters unless Papa Scott wanted to fight.

Kyle glanced at El's dad. He looked ready to leap into

the fray, but even in cougar form he still wore an enormous red bowtie, for heaven's sake. The man was an innocent when it came to wrongdoing, and it was doubtful he could fight for long. Kyle scrambled for an alternative solution.

*Bingo.* It should work, and piss off his uncle at the same time. How much better could instant inspiration get?

He snatched El's hand and pulled her to his side.

"Oh!" A small noise burst from her as she slammed into his chest.

Kyle cleared his throat and made his grand announcement. "We had planned to share this more privately, but since you seem to have made some wrong assumptions, I'd like to inform you that El and I are engaged."

\* \* \*

The room spun. No, it really spun. El clung to her mom's shoulders as the squealing matriarch manhandled her.

"Oh sweetie, I *knew* you were planning something special. This is so exciting!"

El held on to her last sugarplum with sheer determination. She was not about to throw up, although...She eyed Kyle evilly. If she had to, she'd be sure to do it in his direction. The noise had flipped back to less insane levels, the hooting and cries of good wishes meshing with the resumption of the Christmas festivities.

"I sensed there was something secretive happening. I



told Roy it was nothing to be concerned about." Kyle's Auntie Janet enveloped both El and her mom in a big hug. "I insist on organizing an engagement party."

"Oh, that's not--" El spoke as she scrambled out of the confining embrace, trying to scramble out of the confining words. *No freaking way!* This had to be stopped.

Unfortunately, her mother already was totally enamored with the idea, hands clasped in front of her, face shining with delight. "Why, that would be so kind of you. Would you like to hold it here? Or in Colorado? I've heard so many good things about the Ritz, do you think we could book on short notice?"

"Oh, darling, of course. Or we could..."

"But I don't think..."

The ladies wandered off, talking animatedly, completely ignoring the rest of them. El stood, attempting to shake off a slightly dazed sensation. She battled down extreme nausea as well, but that was someone else's fault. She turned to face Kyle. He had a smile pasted to his face, a sickly attempt that twitched at one corner.

"You--" Her voice shook. Her body shook.

"I know we said we'd wait, pumpkin, but Uncle Roy had the wrong idea. I hope you'll *work* with me on this one." He winked the eye on the side away from his uncle and her stomach fell. Kyle actually thought this was a solution? Well, it was better than seeing her father go tooth and claw against another shifter, but who were these people?

"Maybe if you'd--" She began again.

"Kyle, are you sure you know what you're doing?" The older man interrupted, and El bit back a snarl. It would be really nice to get to finish a damn sentence.

Kyle nodded at his uncle, the asshole who'd been spewing nonsense. "Everything is as it should be. If you'll excuse us, I'd like a brief word with my fiancée."

"Branegan, Scott--"

She and Kyle both glanced toward the voice and a million fireworks went off again, this time inside as the media caught them in a swirl of cameras and live recorders. Shit--Kyle's location was being fed to every part of the electronic world even as they stood there. *Relative obscurity* fluttered out the window like an abandoned party favor. Her cop instincts took over.

"Excuse us, sir."

El grabbed Kyle by the wrist and marched him out the side of the room, escaping into the family section of the house. Even as they retreated her mind filled in the missing gaps. Frick, he was a Branegan. Of *the* Branegans--how could she have been so stupid?

She waited until they were safely behind the locked door of her bedroom before she spoke. Even then the roaring pulse in her ears made it hard to think coherently.

She pointed to a chair and he sat obediently. That was good, and bad. Good, because she would have been liable to rip off his head if he had so much as squeaked in protest. Bad, because she could have gone for a rumble to wear off some of her steam. She took a deep, centering

breath. Kyle sat meekly, his hands crossed in his lap like a repentant schoolboy. The white uniform hung open on one side, the button she'd torn from the waist of his pants leaving a gap showcasing his smooth abdominal muscles, and that trail of hair she'd had her fingers tangled in not even an hour ago.

How in the heck had things gone so insane?

"Kyle Branegan. Of the *Colorado* Branegans. The highest ranked cougar family in the western territory...and you were planning on telling me this when?"

There, that came out rational. Calm.

"I'm sorry. It's--"

"I can't believe you didn't freaking tell me!" she shrieked. Okay, not so calm this time. It burst out of her loud enough to echo off the walls and Kyle's eyes widened. His mouth opened as if he'd have the audacity to speak and she snarled at him. "No words--sit and listen. The last time you apologized, I accepted it and we had sex." His eyes lit up. "Ain't going down that way this time, bucko."

Kyle leaned back in the chair and dragged a hand through his hair. "It wasn't supposed to matter. I mean, you were taking me away to hide. What difference would it have made who I was? If I'd told you, would you have brought me to your parent's house in the first place?"

"If I'd known, I would have left your sorry ass handcuffed to my bed!"

"Oh, and that's supposed to be a reason to share anything with you? El...I'm sorry, but don't worry, this was the

best solution. Just...think of it as being undercover."

She casually reached into a drawer and palmed a potentially needed item before crossing her arms and leaning back on the highboy dresser. "Go on, talk your way out of this one, you silver-tongued devil. What possible reason could there be for us to be engaged, other than you've gone utterly insane?"

Kyle fought to hide his smile. She saw it, and she had to turn away slightly. Yeah, the whole situation was surreal and along with the nausea there was a large portion of humor. But she was not letting him off the hook. He'd lied to her parents, as well as to his uncle and aunt. Going to hell in a hand-basket would be a nice refreshing trip after this.

"My uncle is up to something. I'm not sure what he planned to accuse me of, but it almost sounded like a set up for a fall. I've been getting close in my investigation to finding out who the key players--"

"Wait." *Investigation?* "You told me you were a graphic designer who did online consulting, that's why you needed a wi-fi connection. What are you investigating, bad color schemes?"

Kyle opened his mouth then paused. "Shit." He stormed to his feet and paced the room. "Shit, shit, *shit*."

"What?"

He twirled. "I'm not a designer, but I can't tell you what I do."

*As if that was acceptable.* She turned up the perky and batted her eyes at him. "Oh. Okay." He breathed out a

deep sigh and she snapped. "I was kidding, buster. You tell me what I need to know, *all* of what I need, or you're going to be getting rather intimate with that bedpan."

Kyle's mouth twitched. "You wound me."

"If I have to." She slipped out the tranq gun and aimed it straight at his chest.

"Fuck." Kyle dropped to a crouch, hands rising in defense. He backed up slowly. "You're not serious."

"Do I look like I'm not serious?" She gestured with the gun. "I can happily load your unconscious carcass into the truck and have you home before breakfast."

The truth that she really would do it hit him hard--she saw the realization roll across his face. Resignation, and a touch of something else. Admiration? He liked that she'd gotten the jump on him?

Weird cat.

Kyle leaned back on the wall. "I'm an investigator with an underground department of Shifter Intelligence. Most of my work involves media-proofing shifter-caused incidents, but there's something big we've been hearing rumors of for the past year. A new drug that works on the shifter metabolism. Is that enough? Or do you want to know the details about how to use the coffeemaker on the third floor in our secret underground headquarters?"

El stared at him, slightly confused. "A drug that will work on us...how? Tranqs work, what's the big deal?"

"The drug reportedly affects shifter cells. Makes it so you can't shift for a prolonged period of time. In high enough

doses, we're afraid it might cause permanent damage."

Damn, that would be the kind of thing the anti-shifter people would love to get their hands on. The great equalizer. All the other concerns, like getting caught right after a session of virtually public sex, faded into insignificance. She lowered the gun.

"Great. Fabulous. Before we figure out what the hell we're going to do, let me point out that if you lie to me again, I'll tie your tail to the bedpost while you sleep, got it?"

"Clear as a bell."

She tucked the gun into her pants and paced. "Let's recap, shall we? I'm supposed to be keeping you under surveillance and available until the middle of January so you can give evidence at a trial. You need to find the source of a dangerous drug market. We're now supposedly engaged and will have to put in social appearances with the leading families of the North American shifters with media hounding our every step while I attempt to keep you out of their range. Did I cover all the important revelations from the past twenty-four hours?"

Kyle sighed. "There's also my uncle's unusual behavior, your parent's freaky change of circumstances and the fact a wolf drooled on you earlier tonight."

*What the...?* "Samuel wasn't involved with this."

"Oh, and we had the best sex ever out on a balcony about twenty minutes ago."

"That has nothing to do with--"

"It's important to get all the information on the table."

Knocking him out sounded better and better all the time. "The fact we had sex is irrelevant to the situation."

Kyle strode closer, shaking his head. "Actually, it's not. That was the main reason I had to propose the engagement. Every shifter in the area knew we'd had sex. Don't try to tell me your dad wasn't ready to defend your honor when my uncle spouted off."

She sighed. "You're right. Daddy would have got his butt stomped."

He cupped her face in his hand and warmth from their earlier connection rose to the surface. Her mind might be racing with all the new information, but he stood so close it was all she could do to not let her head drop against his chest and let him support her, hide her away from the chaos.

"Let's talk about a change of plans. I don't think we should stay with your parents for the rest of the holidays." Kyle stroked his thumb over her cheek. "I doubt I'm in peril, but if your chief asked for me to be kept hidden because there's even a chance someone crazy is looking for me, I don't want to bring danger to your family. I'd hate to be the cause of your little brothers, or anyone else, getting hurt."

El nodded. "Agreed. I'd suggest my apartment, but it's not big enough for an extended stay. We're talking over three more weeks until the trial. And your place is totally out of the question."

He chuckled. "Well, the boat is out, but that's not my only place. It's just a good spot for the latest part of my

investigations. We can move into my apartment in Colorado. If we make a big deal of it, that will ensure your family will be safe--all the media will follow us and leave them alone."

He had another place? In Colorado? Man, must be nice to have that kind of money. The fact of who he was struck her again. What in the world was an heir of one of the ruling families doing living on a dock?

Shit. No time to dwell on that. She had to concentrate on the details. "Is your place big enough for a longer stay, and can we defend ourselves easily?"

"Oh yeah."

She thought quickly. "I need to touch base with my chief first and let him know what the hell has happened. If he agrees to us dropping the part in my orders about keeping you out of the media eye, then your plan will work. We'll leave Christmas Day after the presents have been opened. I doubt anyone would try to make a move on you before that, and leaving before then would look suspicious. Still, will you do me a favor and stay away from windows? Also, don't take off without me knowing where you are at all times."

Kyle slipped his hand around the back of her neck and in a moment of weakness, she let him draw their bodies together for a long hug. She held on to her extreme panic by a very thin thread. It wasn't worth voicing right now, but Kyle had managed to hit most of her hot buttons with his instantaneous solution.



No matter how logical their masquerade, she didn't *want* to be engaged, not even pretending. The mere thought of getting hitched gave her hives. Venturing down the same path as all the other cougar women of her family--screw that. No bloody way would she give up her career to stay home and pop out kittens. The panicked adrenaline rushing her veins was totally irrational. The only thing stopping her from freaking out was the knowledge that a cancellation of their "engagement" would make the current media storm even worse and her assignment impossible. Drugging him and stashing him in a safe house would totally disrupt his investigation.

She couldn't see an immediate solution--they were trapped in the deception.



## Chapter Seven

Kyle sat in the La-Z-Boy, his feet on the raised extension. If there were one thing he'd love to do right now it would be to order El to relax. She paced the condo again and again across the massive width of the floor, her hands flitting over the back of the couch, the walls, the counter tops. She didn't say a word to him, but her limbs and eyes were never still. It was as if all the energy she wasn't using to scream at him had to find another outlet.

He sighed heavily. He thought their move to his apartment yesterday had gone relatively well. In fact, he'd had a blast watching the kids unwrap a virtual mountain of presents. They'd all shared a quick lunch before he and El had slipped away from the continuing festivities at the Scott household. There had been masses of kisses and hugs from all the little brothers, a few sly winks from the Doublemint twins and the formal presentation by El's dad of one of the Scotts' best jugs of family moonshine for "their personal enjoyment and consumption."

The glass was etched with *Cousin Bubba, 1996*. It kinda brought a tear to Kyle's eye.

El had whitewashed their rapid departure by claiming she and Kyle needed time alone to make plans for the wedding. Not like anything was easy to control in this situation--his aunt and El's mom were already tag teaming back and forth with a campaign for a massive engagement

party and formal announcement. He'd tried to cut them off at the pass, but that was one thing about his aunt. While his Uncle Roy never understood him, Aunt Janet simply never listened.

The phone had rung an hour ago to inform them the party was booked for New Year's Eve at the Ritz. Five bloody days from now.

That's when the pacing had begun. Even in her human form, El's cat was visible. She was graceful and sexy and she made Kyle's brain ache. His balls were sore from having to sit without touching her the entire trip to Colorado in the private plane his uncle had insisted on sending. She never relaxed until they'd finally raced through the doors of his apartment and she was sure they were alone.

He trailed his gaze after her, her butt cheeks flexing under the sloppy pair of pajama pants she wore. She took her job damn seriously, and he admired that. He liked a woman with a brain, really he did, but right now it was her body driving him crazy. Her scent blazed a path through his nostrils, around his neck and finished with a flourish by tying a big bow at the base of his cock.

It was unbearable--being in the same room as her when she was pissed off. Because pissed off was one small step away from aroused, and *that* was what he really wanted.

"Can I get you something, El?"

No answer, just the *slap, slap, slap, slap* of her bare feet against the hardwood flooring as she paced.

"Pizza last night was good, hey? You want to order

Chinese or something tonight?"

*Slap, slap, slap.*

"What's on the agenda this morning? I'm going to do more research, but we'll need some down time as well. What you think? Television? Cards? Tiddlywinks?"

*Slap, slap...* A pause as she pivoted at the window. She stared out at the downtown skyline, her arms crossed over her chest. Kyle could have jumped her right there and then...*slap, slap.* She resumed her pacing.

Frankly, he liked her better when she screamed at him.

Kyle rose to his feet and sauntered straight into the kitchen. He timed it perfectly so he knocked her hard with his shoulder as he passed. He didn't even attempt to get out of her way.

"Bastard."

He paused in the middle of opening the fridge. "Oh, you do still know how to talk. I thought maybe the cat got your tongue."

El gave him the finger.

Kyle hid his grin as he searched through the plastic containers on the shelf. "Where're the leftovers from last night?"

"The pizza? I ate it for breakfast when you were in the shower."

Oh fab--just what he needed--a reason to fake a fight. He twirled. "You didn't. You ate all the pizza? For breakfast? That's..."

She raised a brow and he reconsidered what to say. He

wanted to make her mad. He didn't want to end up in a full body cast. "That stinks. I planned on having that."

"Well, I planned on having a normal life, but I got stuck with you, didn't I?"

*Ouch.* "You trying to piss me off?"

EI stalked toward him. Closer, closer. Even closer. Her scent pooled in his toes after shooting throughout his entire system in less than three seconds. Damn, she made his mouth water...

"Ack."

She hadn't stopped, simply reached past him into the fridge to grab the juice container. Her torso pressed him back against the door, random condiments poking him in the back. Kyle couldn't stop himself, he dipped his head and licked along the tendon on the side of her neck. Hmm, she tasted good.

She froze under his tongue, except for the arm lifting the juice jug. That one moved, straight back into his space. Then, as if struck by a case of palsy, her arm convulsed and he was very wet. Cold. Sticky.

Cougar flavored orange juice. It would never sell.

"Oops." EI backed away and wrinkled her nose at him. "Damn. Guess you'd better go have another shower."

Kyle hid his smile. "I guess I will, only I'm too hungry to wait." He reached into the fridge and snagged the coffee cream. He turned as if to get out of her way then snatched her against him, her left arm trapped against his chest, her right held tight in his grip. She struggled, but he'd nabbed

her perfectly--good thing too. Her claws were out, and his kitty was ready to use some of that pent up energy.

Fine with him.

She wasn't wearing a bra under her shirt, and both nipples were rock hard, staring at him like high beams on a fast car. He'd never felt such sympathy for deer before. Unable to look away, mesmerized by the evidence that no matter how pissed she was, she still wanted him.

"Double bastard."

"No, double cream."

She stilled and then gasped as the cold liquid struck her collarbone. He poured thin lines, drawing a design on her beautiful skin, the thick cream clinging to the warm surface for a second before sliding lower and smearing with the heat. A line along the right breast, a loop between her cleavage. Over to the other collarbone--by the time he was done there was sticky cream coating all her visible skin, and she hadn't moved an inch. A trail trickled down the surface of her T-shirt. A single droplet pooled together and clung like a pearly white bead from her rigid nipple.

All the struggle had left her, and when he dragged his gaze back to hers, he swore softly. Her pupils were dilated--huge and hypnotic. Her breath escaped in small pants, the tension in her body no longer that of flight or fight, but *fuck me*.

"Ei?" he whispered.

She swallowed hard. "This may be the stupidest thing I've ever done, after taking the bloody assignment in the

first place, but..." She whipped off her T-shirt and exposed those lovely tits, and his body went on high alert. "Come on, kitty cat, enjoy some cream."

"All the cream I want?" Kyle trailed a finger through the mess on her upper chest, drawing the thick substance farther south.

"All you want."

Freed by the removal of the confining material, tiny trails of moisture slowly descended, turning her body into an erotic lace design. Kyle hardly knew where to begin.

El took matters into her own hands. She backed them away from the fridge and the cold air blowing down on them. One hop brought her up on the island counter where she arched her back and suddenly his mouth was on her and he'd never enjoyed a bowl of cream more in his life.

He started with lazy circles to catch the liquid lying along the top of her smooth firm mounds. The next step involved a long continuous drag from the underside of her right breast, looping over the top and finishing with a figure eight around the needy left breast. He lapped, and sucked, and nipped. There wasn't an inch of skin left untouched, and a great many he had to return to again and again.

It was as if her nipples were taunting him. They stared at him until he dipped his head and suckled, the full circles of her areolas disappearing into tiny dime-sized peaks with pin hard mountain caps that spiked against his tongue and begged to be bitten.

"So good. Yeah, there, that's the spot. Ohhh..." El purred



in contentment as he added his hands to his exploration. His palms soaked in the warmth of her skin as he smoothed over her hips, skimmed up her back. He undid her buttons, and with a flurry of movement, stripped her bare and laid her on the countertop.

He grabbed one leg and kissed her ankle. As he applied small brushes of his tongue all along the inside of her leg until he reached her core, she twitched and shook, and made the most incredible noises.

"Keep this here." He placed her foot on the counter beside her hip, opening her smooth bare center to his gaze and intimate touch.

She blew out her breath in a long, slow hiss. "Come on, Kyle. You're going too damn slow."

He rose over her, ready to be indignant, and found her grinning. "It's not a contest sweetheart."

"No, but if you don't fuck me soon, I'm going to have to rip your clothes off. Get on with it."

"I'm not done with my cream." He stayed staring into her face as he trickled his fingertips along the same line his tongue had followed earlier. Without looking, he found her sex and slid a finger easily into her core. "Hmm, so warm, so wet."

Her eyes widened, and so did her grin. He pumped one finger, then two, and her eyes rolled back in her head. When he added a third, stretching her wide, she licked her lips and hummed.

Kyle turned his attention to his fingers. Watching them

disappear in and out of her body fascinated him. Her cream coated his hand, the rush of liquid heavy and hot on his skin. Her clit looked so lonely he had to go and make it feel better. He planted a single kiss over the apex of her mound, his fingers still buried deep inside and her hips convulsed.

There was so much he wanted to do, but there was no time and no way to do it all simultaneously. He hardened his tongue and swirled it around her needy nub, and her hips bucked again.

"Damn it, am I going to have to tie you down? Stay still."

Kyle withdrew his fingers, clamped onto her with both hands and dove in for the kill. He ate her hungrily, lapping every bit of cream possible. He feasted on the liquid painted on her thighs, the moisture on her nether lips. One thorough draw after the other in a long line from stem to stern--and he still couldn't get enough.

He thrust his tongue into her sex as far as it would go, swirling in circles. That triggered a fresh supply of cream as she ground against him. He drew her clit into his mouth, suckling hard. The instant her core fluttered in response he stood, dropped his pants and slid home.

The heat on his aching cock felt incredible. His mind barely registered the flapping of his jeans and belt as he hauled her hips to the edge of the counter and thrust in again, deeper. Filling her completely. Her orgasm must have broke when he penetrated her, because as he remained still the pulse of her muscles around him was so

freaky good he didn't move, simply enjoyed the ride. He slowly rubbed her clit and she bucked, driving him deeper.

Oh yeah, that was the trick. He did it again, increasing the pressure slightly. She gasped and moaned and cried out his name until he couldn't bear it any longer. He held on to her hips for dear life and rode her hard. Pounding into her, his cock squeezed tight on each plunge, feeling her heat surround him, loving the way she welcomed him in. El wrapped her legs around his waist and for a couple of thrusts it was her in charge, dragging him bodily into her core with her strong leg muscles. Then she lifted her limbs higher to drape them over his shoulders and Kyle saw stars. He'd never been so deep in a woman before. The new angle was so much more intense, and only a few thrusts later he lost control and came, shooting pulse after pulse into her, her happy face smiling up at him as he came so hard his vision blurred.

They panted, full grins painted across their faces. Sticky juice and lines of cream coated them both. He reluctantly withdrew from her body, and a rush of seed followed. He held out a hand and helped her to a sitting position and she grabbed him, pulling their torsos together as she kissed him brainless. Not that he had far to go or anything.

She laughed as he stumbled back to find a chair to collapse in. "You need to work on your stamina."

Kyle waggled his brows. "I can do that. Right after I order some more food, we can go and do some stamina building sprints in the shower. You game?"

She winked. "Game on. But for the record? I still don't like you very much."

"Ditto."

El stared down at the counter and wrinkled her nose. "And I don't clean kitchens."

\* \* \*

El stretched lazily, her eyes closed, listening to the television show Kyle had playing in the background. Her legs were stretched out the length of the couch, and Kyle absentmindedly rubbed her feet. Oh man, the guy had magic fingers. He pressed hard into the ball of one foot and the ensuing streak of pleasure raced up the inside of her leg and plugged into her sex like an extension cord into a high volt battery.

It really was unfair how quickly the man turned her on.

They'd been holed up for two days, and other than diving into his research work, they'd done nothing, not setting a foot outside the apartment.

"You think we're doing the right thing?"

"What's that?" He brought those mesmerizing baby blues to focus fully on her.

El crossed her arms behind her head and shrugged. "You said this engagement was the only way to keep media attention low. There are still camera men outside the door."

Kyle sighed. "There's only two or three. Trust me, that's good news. If we were doing anything interesting, there would be up to a hundred."

She nodded. It was such a strange experience, like falling into a rabbit hole. And like Alice, nothing was what she expected. When they hadn't been on the computers digging for dirt, they'd been doing the nasty. After that first day of holding back and trying to stay professional, El had called it for what it was. She had been pissed off, and wanted to punish him. But now that she'd let the cat out of the bag, so to speak, her cougar wanted to rut on him all the time. Like, all the time. Even as she checked him over, there was an interested ache in her core. Her inner cat twitched and struggled to be released.

Screw it.

She sat up and stripped off her shirt.

"Hmm, much better than the show." The interest in Kyle's voice made her hesitate, but her cat wanted out too bad to resist.

"Later, Casanova. I need to take a little R&R." He watched with hungry eyes as she tugged off the rest of her clothes, his gaze fixated on her bare crotch. She laughed. "You want to join me?"

He reached for her and she danced away. "In cat, you idiot."

She shifted before waiting for his response. Her cougar itched to get out. The transformation felt as good as always, the scents that exploded into her brain even better. He was the main thing she smelled, his aroma a mixture of sex and fun.

She padded over to where Kyle was in the process of

dropping his pants, and she batted his naked butt with her head, sending him flying to the floor.

"Hey, cool it. That's not fair. Two hundred pounds of cougar versus one man?"

El crawled over him and licked him from collarbone to temple, her tongue smearing a wide streak as he laughed maniacally at her. He wrapped his arms around her torso and hugged her cat form, and suddenly the whole insane chaos of the past week seemed all worth it.

There hadn't been a time since she'd broken up with Samuel and left home that she had a partner she could *play* with. Most humans she'd fooled around with had either not known she was a shifter, or they'd been looking for the experience of fucking a furry. As she rolled to her side and Kyle came with her, she realized that was a pretty screwed up way to live--either being feared or sought after for a part that wasn't who you were, but simply *was* a part of you.

With Kyle, she didn't have to fake anything. Didn't have to pretend she was in the mood for something when she wasn't. Of course, considering he was sex-on-the-prowl, she was always in the mood. He had turned her into a lust machine, and there always seemed to be time for another romp, trapped as they were twenty-four/seven.

Kyle scratched her ribs, digging his fingers into her fur, and she purred happily, rolling to her back to give him better access. He sat up and draped his legs over her body, leaning back on the couch as he pet her lazily. "You know, I was thinking. We have to maintain this engagement

for a while to keep my uncle off our back, but there are a few other positive twists. My brothers, for example. Jake's got to take over the position as ruler from Uncle Roy--man, I hope that's soon, too--but he'd be far better off with a partner by his side. If he thinks we're getting hitched, he'll be more open to the idea for himself."

El patted him with sheathed paws. Great, the man was acting matchmaker now. Another poor woman sacrificed on the matrimonial altar. Why not toss in a lobotomy for good measure? She rolled out of reach and paced toward the playroom to burn off a little steam without having to resort to sex. Not that sex was a bad method, now that she'd given in to her cat urges. And Kyle was a very good itch-scratcher, in more ways than one, but...

She paced down the hall, letting her body move without thinking about where her paws were landing. With every day that passed, as she learned more about Kyle, there was more to admire. He was a good agent. Thorough, efficient. She'd had a chance to go through all his files and correspondence regarding his most recent cases, and everything he did impressed her. It was clear from others' responses he had an excellent reputation and yet was very much known as a cat.

Somehow he'd found the balance, staying strong enough and yet playful enough that the scary cat side didn't make waves when he was on the job. She wished they'd had time for her to observe him interact a little more with humans--she could probably learn a few things about how to keep

true to her cat side and not make the non-shifters uncomfortable, unlike what she'd been doing, sacrificing her cat's needs. Maybe when this whole thing was over, she'd be able to work with him. Train a little.

Maybe it had nothing to do with anything but lust, but she had it in spades for the guy. She even admired how he'd been trying to make her more comfortable over the past days, getting her to help him with research. The two of them together had scoured the Internet for clues, and while they hadn't found the answer yet, she'd discovered he was intelligent, and caring, and damn good at what he did.

She pawed open the door to the playroom. She still couldn't believe Kyle had a cat's version of a playground set in his penthouse. When he'd given her the grand tour he'd shrugged.

"I don't need room for more guests, but when other shifters come to visit, it's nice to have a place for us to go in our cat form that doesn't involve having to vacuum all the furniture in the morning."

There were platforms and ropes, and obstacles to maneuver. El laughed inside--if any of Samuel's pack saw this they would tease Kyle unmercifully about owning an enormous scratching post. She took aim at the side platform and sprang into the air. She missed the top landing, a dinky little four-by-four-foot thing, but managed to snag the second level, curling her body around the support post until it stopped swaying.

It was a fabulous way to exercise both her mind and her



body, and did she ever need it. She ran loops, setting a course she repeated again and again, each time trying to finish the circuit faster and cleaner. A tuck jump from one side to the other, followed by a dash around a support base. A climb up a sharp incline, then a swing hop from one rickety lily pad to the next. El enjoyed the sensation of blood pumping through her, the thrill of using and challenging her cat making her sing out in happiness.

Kyle answered back.

She whipped her head around to face him. Long, lean muscles flexed under his tawny skin as he stepped forward. His bright cougar eyes bore into her, the power of his shifter family rolling off him like heat waves above a sun-scorched road. She kept her feet through sheer determination, holding herself vertical, keeping her gaze locked on him. He rubbed along her side, every inch of his fur brushing hers, before he sauntered to the starting position, crouched and then exploded onto the course.

El watched with admiration as he stretched through her routine, beating her leaps easily, struggling through the tight corners she'd set that were more suited to her smaller size. When he made the final rush and crossed the finish line she would have applauded if she'd had hands.

So she did the next best thing.

She jumped him, letting their cat bodies roll over and over together until they smacked into the base of one of the platforms. She landed on top, her weight pinning him down and even as she showed her teeth she knew it would never

last. With a laughing snarl, he twisted, trapping her under him as she squirmed. He grasped her neck with his teeth.

The resulting rush of sexual pheromones that hit her made her knees go weak.

It was instinctive--impossible to ignore--for her to give in to the dominant male taking his reward. Everything in her that protested the unfairness of her body submitting gave way to the reality that her brain acknowledged it too. He was physically stronger than her, but he was also at least her equal in the brain department.

That was the sexiest part of it all.

She pressed against him willingly, putting herself into his command. Kyle licked her neck, nuzzling her, his big cougar limbs caging her in, keeping her trapped. A rumble of contentment vibrated against her, emanating from his chest, and she answered in kind. Once more she felt his power--the inhuman vibration that came from shifter control and hierarchy--as it wrapped around them both. El gasped as the force dragged her from her cat form and she found herself naked, their human bodies pressed skin to skin. He knelt at her back, his erection tight between them, his lips at her neck. Urgent kisses followed, one hand coming around her torso, one anchoring his body to the ground.

They both panted, hard. The emotion and need racing through her was unusual and yet undeniable. He stilled. El wiggled with need. What the hell was he waiting for?

Kyle stroked the side of her torso, caressing her breast, and then she realized. He waited for her. For her human

side to choose, not simply accept her cat's decision. A small nugget of the fear in her soul melted away.

Did she want this? Oh, did she ever.

"Yes. Take me." Kyle kissed her again, but when he would have rolled her to her back, she braced herself, spreading her knees wider and raising her hips to him. "This way."

His curses were soft, heartfelt, as she rocked back against him. Seeking, needing. He took her then, hard. Powerful enough to please both the cat and the woman, so that when she cried out with pleasure her voice carried the timbre of a roar that echoed off the playroom walls.



## Chapter Eight

El popped the lasagna back into the oven and reset the timer. Thirty more minutes should do it. Kyle had already set the table and made a salad before puttering back to his computer, hot on the trail of some information.

The whole setting screamed homey, and she didn't even want to crawl out of her skin.

She picked up her wine glass and went to stare at the lights of the city. She loved it here, high above the rest of the world. Tomorrow was New Year's Eve, and they would head out for the party. For a night of flashbulbs and questions to grin through without providing any real answers or making any real commitments. When this assignment was over she wanted to be able to walk away with her head held high, with no lingering aftereffects.

The red wine Kyle had opened earlier slid smoothly over her tongue, the brilliant flavor seducing her taste buds. It was a wonderful accompaniment to the setting. Christmas lights sparkled in the city below, and in the air the aroma of the lasagna lingered--part of the delivery the previous day along with a whole fridge-full of other meals prepared by a fabulous local catering company.

She was fighting hard not to get too attached to the lifestyle.

She'd checked in with her chief and coordinated the information she needed to make sure the situation at the

club for the following night had adequate protection. The only good part of it being an engagement party--she'd be able to stick to Kyle like a partridge in a pear tree.

It wasn't going to be easy to return to her regular street beat and the undercover bike scene, but with the things she'd learned from Kyle, she'd get back into the swing eventually. Maybe she'd take a holiday first, travel a little. That would help settle the rollercoaster of emotions she kept facing at the thought of not seeing him anymore.

She stared out the window until the oven timer went off, the low buzz echoing through the room. She hauled out the pasta, covered it and went look for Kyle.

"Hey, guy, supper's ready."

He was in his usual position at the computer, feet up on a box, iPod ear buds plugged in and his music playing so loud the heavy pulse was audible from across the room.

Good thing shifter senses healed quickly--a human would be deaf after a few days of his abuse. And the music? El cringed at the sudden shriek that carried across the room and dragged its nails up her spine.

"Kyle." She gave up and stepped into his line of vision. He still didn't notice her, he was so intent on the screen. She reached out and jerked one plug from his ear. "Hey, grub's up."

He shook himself and rubbed his face as if surprised to see her. "What...what's that?"

One snap of the wrist unplugged his music. What had caught his eye to make him so focused? "There's food. You

hungry?"

He gave no response to her words at first, just a cold, empty stare. "I found something."

*Shit.* She spun to get a better look. "The contact in your chemical investigation?"

He rotated the screen toward her a little more and she paused. "What are you doing? That's a picture of your uncle. Did you flip to a different screen or something?"

Kyle pushed himself away and spun the chair. He rose and started pacing all in one motion. "My uncle's not the contact, but all of a sudden his name has shown up in the middle of the mess. I found an unprotected phone trace and followed it back to a dozen sites. His computer signatures are crystal clear. He's not even bothering to use a protected ISPN, and the trail goes all over the place. All the sites I've bookmarked on an almost daily basis for the last couple of months, ever since I started looking for information."

He snatched a pillow from the back of the chair and hurled it across the room. "Fuck. *Fuck.*"

El went very still. Kyle's anger bubbled like a pot of burnt mulled cider. He was furious, and the edges of his power turned dark. She stepped closer. This couldn't be good for him. Or for her, to be trapped in close quarters with a wild cat. "Kyle, you need to stay calm and not jump to any conclusions."

He snarled at her, but she kept her gaze fixed on him. He fought the cat--striving to keep the animal part of his nature under control. She licked her lips and tried not to

think about how much she wanted sex at that moment. To her human side the reaction seemed irrational, unreasonable. To her cat? Her cat wanted to lie down and offer itself to her partner, to make him feel better.

A spike of fear shot through her. *Partner?* Fuck. Where the hell had that come from?

She closed her eyes and drew a steadying breath. There was nothing to fear from him. Nothing. Complete and utter conviction raced through her.

She stepped forward, her arms held open and low. "Kyle?"

He glared at her, and she worked hard to project nothing but innocence in her body stance. The tension in his shoulders dropped slightly, and he stepped over and snatched her against him. He buried his face in her neck and breathed deep, as if drawing strength from her.

El held him for a few minutes, rubbing his back, stroking her fingers along his shoulders and through his unruly hair. He pulled away just far enough to speak quietly into her ear.

"If I turn Uncle Roy in right now without finding out how he's involved, the clan goes to chaos, even if Jake is ready to take over leadership. We could end up with internal bickering and bloodshed in the cat clans for the next ten years if the other families decide to challenge Jake's authority and battle it out. But if I let my uncle go, I'm a traitor to both my investigative team and the shifters around the world potentially harmed by this chemical. I need to find a way..."



He dragged a hand through his hair and she clung to him, their bellies tight together, sharing warmth.

"Whatever I can do to help, I'm here." It was all she had to offer.

She couldn't imagine what was going through his brain. She couldn't imagine the pain. Yeah, her family was ripe for joking about, with their unorthodox ways, but the truth was she loved every single one of the insane bunch. During the stories Kyle had shared over the past couple days, about growing up with his uncle and aunt, there had been a longing in his voice for more connection, a place to belong. Cats might not have the same kind of need for multiple family to cling to that other shifters had, but they still liked having a few chosen close kin.

To have his longings turned into something potentially darker than a misunderstood childhood was a bitter pill to swallow.

He kissed the top of her head, arms locked around her body. "Thank you."

They turned back to the screen together. El leaned in to take a closer look at the information. She scrolled down the page, speed-reading through the notes Kyle had amassed. "What's with all the 12.31 references?"

Kyle gave a bitter laugh. "Remember back at the Christmas party when I said it looked as if my uncle was pissed to see me? And even more surprised when I announced our engagement?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you hear he went ballistic when your mom and Aunt Janet arranged the party for the thirty-first?"

El grimaced. "Even my mom mentioned something, and she doesn't usually comment about stuff like that. What's up?"

Kyle pointed at the screen. "Uncle Roy is involved in *something* big, and what's more, he's set up a meeting for New Year's Eve. I have until tomorrow to decide if I should turn my uncle in or save his ass."

\* \* \*

They ate quietly while Kyle tried his best for a few minutes to forget his world had been torn in two. He wanted to enjoy El's company. Just because he suspected his uncle had a lump of coal for a heart, she didn't need to suffer through dinner with a man whose expression was enough to turn the meal to ash.

"Do you have everything you need for tomorrow? Your dress fits? You're happy with it?"

El leaned back in her chair, cradling her wine glass in both hands. The red liquid swirled as she played with the goblet. "It's amazing. I feel like a little girl dressing up in her mother's fancy ball gown."

She turned her head to look out the window and Kyle stared in fascination at her profile. At the smooth curve of her cheek, the graceful line of her neck. He'd been looking forward to tonight so much before his awful discovery. The

package he'd ordered on a whim had arrived, and he had hoped to make a little party of giving her a present.

Right now he didn't feel like partying.

Still, he didn't want to wait until tomorrow, and possibly have to fight her when their time was more limited. If they were going to have a brawl over his purchase, he'd like to do it now. "I have something for you."

Her wine glass returned carefully to the table, she raised a brow expectantly. "You do? Another set of skimpy lingerie?"

"Am I so predictable?"

The light in her eyes made him smile. "It's not so much that you're predictable as consistent."

Well, she had him there. The first night in the condo he'd had an online Victoria's Secret shopping spree, and the boxes had been pretty much arriving steadily ever since.

"No naughty underwear this time. Something to go with your dress, not under it. Give me a minute."

He returned from the bedroom with the box and her face fell. "Kyle, what's that?"

"I thought women were supposed to like blue boxes. Go on, open it."

He passed over the long slender container and was surprised to see her fingers shake slightly as she cracked it open. His gaze never left her face, so he caught the constantly changing emotions written there for him.

Surprise, delight, shock...sadness? *Damn it.*

He spoke quickly, before she could protest. "I didn't think

you'd feel comfortable wearing any of the family glitz, so I picked these out for you."

She lifted the strand of black pearls cautiously. "Is this real?"

"Now don't start rumbling about how much it cost and things like that. Not now. Please, just accept that I can afford it, and I'd love for you to wear them. For me." Kyle squatted by her side, resting a hand on her thigh. "People will expect you to have jewelry, so in a way it's part of the disguise. But..."

He took the necklace from her and stood to fasten it for her. The dark pearls draped beautifully around her neck, the contrast with her warm skin making something inside him ache. He bent to press a kiss to her nape, hands resting lightly on her shoulders.

Kyle took a deep, steadying breath. He'd never felt this way before. There was a kind of edgy fluttering in his belly, as if he was afraid, and yet all that filled his mind was how much he wanted to be with El.

If she turned down his present, he wasn't sure what he'd do.

He needed this, an acceptance of who he was and what was important to him. In light of the ridiculous situation with the man who should be his role model now as far from it as possible, Kyle felt a deep need...to be needed. Accepted, even if it was for a bauble or trinket.

El pressed a hand on top of his.

"Thank you. They're beautiful." She whispered the words

and he smiled at her, coming around to her side.

"You show them off well." He traced a finger along the strand, feeling the heat they'd already picked up from her body.

El took a deep breath, her chest rising beneath his hand. She lifted her chin resolutely and stood. He stepped back to avoid crowding her and she held out her hand.

"Come."

He frowned. "What's up?"

"I want to show you something."

Her hand in his was warm but firm as she led him back to the bedroom. When he was seated on the edge of the bed she lowered herself by his side and kissed his cheek softly.

"Don't say a word, okay?" she requested. "Just...feel."

Kyle bit back a groan as the back of her knuckles brushed his neck. She unbuttoned his shirt, stopping to drop a kiss against his chest. Slowly she revealed more of his skin until the fabric fell from his shoulders altogether. Her hands smoothed him, rubbing his tight neck muscles, petting him in all the right ways. He closed his eyes and tried to focus only on this moment. Her, here with him. The scent of good wine and cinnamon hanging on the air. The jazz he'd put on to play during dinner faint in the background. She undid his belt and zipper and helped him out of his pants and shorts, teasing brushes against his skin driving his desire for her higher.

El stepped away and did a slow strip for him, her gaze

clinging to his face as her top opened and fell to the floor. Another red bra...He hadn't ordered nearly enough of them, not with the way the tiny cups pushed her breasts up, the edges of her nipples peeking at him over the far-too-low edge of the fabric.

She shrugged off one shoulder strap, then the other before reaching behind her. The cups fell away, her tight nipples springing into sight, and suddenly he was hungry all over again. She wiggled down the short skirt she wore, shimmed the panties away and reached for the sky as she stretched. It was an innately catlike move, a sensual display of her body for his enjoyment--and her own, if her grin was anything to judge by. She pivoted on the spot, the rounds of her ass cheeks flexing, the warmth of her skin in the flickering Christmas lights making her the prettiest and most erotic decoration he'd ever seen.

When she moved forward, the only things she wore were the strand of dark pearls and a lust-filled smile.

They moved together on the bed, finding new ways to touch and be touched. Kyle licked along her collarbone; she cupped his ass in her hands then scratched her way up his entire back. He rolled her over him, then under, dropping to kiss her belly and inner thighs before paying attention to the smooth needy place between her legs. He couldn't get enough of her cream, the liquid from her body better than the Shiraz they'd shared at dinner. She took back control and engulfed him with her mouth and he shouted loud enough the walls echoed. When she finally straddled him

and eased herself onto his aching shaft they both groaned in relief. Slow, even movements followed as she rode him, her body taking him in, squeezing him tight. Her eyes, mesmerizing and wide, held his gaze like a magnet. He couldn't turn away, not to admire the breasts he cupped, not to watch where she slipped around him so intimately. All the rest became purely physical sensations because all he saw was what she shared through her eyes.

She cared. It was more than being a cat, more than being a friend, more than...this moment.

Kyle cupped her face in his hands and pulled her against him, unable to maintain the intimacy of her gaze any longer. Instead, he used his mouth, connecting them. He used his hips, pressing again and again into her welcoming heat, and when she clutched around him with her orgasm, it made him so damn happy he could die.

One more roll brought her back under him, her body still squeezing him tight, and he dropped his head to her shoulder and resumed control. Pressing into her deep, joining them together, and when he came, deep inside her, it wasn't only their bodies that connected, it felt as if a bit of his soul was with her as well.





## Chapter Nine

Kyle nodded politely to yet another well-wisher, his fingers threatening to grow sticky where they clung to El's. "Do you see him yet?" he whispered out the side of his mouth.

"Not a sign. Are you sure...?"

"Yes." No. At this point Kyle wasn't sure about anything.

"We saw him at the start."

Yeah, Uncle Roy had been around when they'd arrived at the party, doing the head-of-the-clan thing. Luckily, Jake and Conner had shown up and distracted them all before Kyle said something he shouldn't have.

Speak of the devil.

His oldest brother, Jake, his kilt flapping regally about his knees, wove his way to where he and El stood on display. Something between a shiver of disgust and one of pride hit Kyle as he saw another family member in the traditional Branegan ceremonial attire. It certainly wasn't anything he'd want to wear on a daily basis, but the look El had given him when he dressed in the kilt and gear had been mighty distracting. That was a consideration for another time though. Right now he needed to not think about how soft her fingers were in his, or how much he'd like to have her run those soft fingers up under his kilt to discover what he'd hidden beneath it.

Damn, what was he concentrating on again?

Jake waved and Kyle snapped to attention. The time for

the next part of the plan approached. In another ten minutes they'd be able to make a break for it and proceed. First a formal dance, then deal with Uncle Roy. El and he had talked through the plan all morning long, and it was as good as it was going to get since she refused to stay out of it. Actually, he looked forward to having her help. Maybe his days as a Lone Ranger Cougar were over. A trickle of an idea had floated through his mind the past couple days. He'd have to talk to his superiors and see what they thought of him taking a cohort in the SIC. El would make a dandy undercover partner, in more ways than one.

"You kids look good together." The rough timbre of Jake's voice brought back so many memories. Kyle might not want to live in his brothers' pockets, but he did enjoy their company, in small doses. "El, you make that dress look fabulous."

"You're not bad yourself," El said, and Kyle took an instinctive step closer.

Jake laughed. "Cool it, bro, I'm not looking to steal your girl. You do the settling down thing, not me. That trap is not going to catch this cougar."

Under his grasp, El stiffened, and Kyle rubbed her back soothingly. "You never know. When it's right, it's right." He bit back a cry of pain as El pinched his butt, hard. The kilt he wore offered little protection.

*Okay, stopping the teasing now.*

Kyle looked Jake over. "Not that I'm making any demands, mind you, but any plans for taking over from

Uncle Dearest soon? I hear you're well on the way."

Jake's brow rose. "You've never expressed interest before. Why ask now? You planning on moving permanently into the area? Want a piece of the family territory?"

*Not in this lifetime.* "No, just thinking of the clans, that kind of thing."

A solid blow landed on his back as Jake stood beside him and thumped him hard. "I am taking over--when the time is right. Though you and the old guy don't get along too well, so far he's not doing a bad job. I figure I'll make my move during the next year. You know cats. If I do anything too fast, half of the clan will think I'm not established enough, and that I'm offering myself up for a coup. I'd prefer to avoid that."

*Me too, buddy.* Kyle let go of El's hand and impulsively hugged his brother. "You're going to do great."

A series of rapid tugs on his kilt brought his attention back to El, the brilliant red of her silky dress against her smooth skin making his mouth water in spite of the whole situation.

"He's back," she whispered.

Jake nodded politely as Kyle excused them and led El onto the dance floor. She settled into his arms and it was scary how natural it felt to have her there.

"You ready to roll?" He lifted her chin, staring into her eyes. "You've got the tough job."

She wagged her brows at him. "My job? Piece of cake. Just reassure me once more that you're certain you've got

more authority than him. If he uses the bad-ass shifter power on us, I don't want to be ordered down because you're subservient."

Kyle shook his head. "He's ruling now because he had to, but I'm direct bloodline. Even back at the house last week, couldn't you tell? I'm stronger than him. I won't call him out in public, I don't want to rule. Jake's stuck with that nightmare, but I'm definitely strong enough to back you up and control him if needed."

They swayed together on the floor another minute or two, nodding politely to the other couples crowded around. As fake engagement parties went, it wasn't bad. It was interesting to see the people who had dropped everything to join in. Kyle held El close. He could kinda maybe even get used to this. Having El around.

Uncle Roy checked his watch again, and Kyle swore. "We're cutting it close. Let's get into position."

Lips, soft and warm, pressed against his, and he reveled in the sensation. El drew back, a soft smile on her face. "For luck."

They strolled casually off the dance floor, fingers linked together, and headed down the long hall leading to the elevators. Anyone watching would assume they were headed to their room, maybe for a bit of fooling around before midnight struck. It only took a moment for Kyle to get into position, watching as El smoothed her dress over her hips. He shoved down the interest that rose in a rush. Now was not the time to think about his need to bend her over

something and fuck her silly. Although that was another definite benefit of having to wear a kilt in the traditional tartan for the party...

"Excuse me, sir." El's clear voice cut through the party noise carrying from the main ballroom. Kyle pressed back farther into the shadows as she met Uncle Roy in the middle of the hall. "Could I have a moment?"

The man stopped, his shoulders slightly drooped. He didn't look nearly as in control and mean as Kyle remembered.

"Young lady. What can I do for you?"

Kyle frowned. All the bluster and big-cat-around-town was missing. This wasn't his uncle, this was some sad old dude shuffling to the corner coffee shop to play solitaire for hours. Jake had better be ready to take over the clan ASAP.

El sidled up to him and hooked her arm through his. "I thought we should have a little talk. I feel as if we got off on the wrong foot at my parents', but I wanted..." She hesitated, and Kyle wondered what was wrong. *Stick to the plan, woman. Spit it out.* She cleared her throat. "I wanted to tell you how much your nephew means to me. He's a good man."

Crap, she was good at this. Kyle was impressed with the emotion and sincerity she managed to get into her voice.

Uncle Roy took a deep breath. All the gruffness he'd displayed earlier was gone, and he patted El's hand kindly.

"I'm glad. He and I have had our differences over the years, but I do care about the boy. Hate to see him making mistakes that will jeopardize him, and you. I don't want you to get hurt."

El laughed, the bright sound wrapped with a tinge of pain on the edges. "Funny, that's what he said about you." They were directly across from the target location, as planned, and El drew to stop. She turned to face him and shook her head sadly. "I have no idea where things went wrong between the two of you, but trust me when I say this is for your own good." She patted his hand where it lay on top of hers.

Uncle Roy jolted upright and swore. He wavered on his feet for a second. "Damn it, girl, what have you done?"

El caught him as the man collapsed to the ground, limbs falling askew.

Kyle raced down the hall just in time to yank open the door and haul his uncle into the closet. "You managed to drug him without me even spotting it. Where'd you get him?"

"Inside of the arm. He probably thought I accidentally pinched him when I took his arm." She kept speaking even as they arranged his uncle's boneless limbs carefully. "There was something weird about the situation though. He sure didn't act like the kingpin of some criminal organization about to loose a nasty drug on the unsuspecting shifter world."

Yeah, Kyle had his doubts, but this was not the time to try

to figure it out. "If he's in deep, he'd have to be good at acting. Come on, he's out for the next hour, right?"

"Should be, I adjusted the tranq dosage for my best guess of his weight." She wrinkled her nose as she stared down at the inert body. "Still think there's something weird going on."

He tugged her from the confining quarters and used the deadbolt, pocketing the key. "I'll head down to the parkade. You shift and meet me there in five, right?"

She nodded and disappeared into the washroom.

\* \* \*

It seemed to take hours to slip silently to the lowest level and the farthest section of the hotel parking lot. There were few cars in the isolated area, the partygoers abandoning this section for easier and more accessible stalls for after their New Year's champagne imbibing. Kyle let his eyes adjust to the dim light, staying well back from where the meeting was scheduled to occur. Sometime in the past couple days Uncle Roy had switched the meeting to this location--probably to allow him to slip away from the party unnoticed.

Across the expanse a tawny face appeared as El showed herself to him briefly before tucking her cougar body behind a support pillar.

They sat. The timer ticking down in his mind lent a strange resonance to the thoughts flashing through his brain. The disappointments of his youth, the wild living he'd

enjoyed over the past years as he worked for the CSI.

EI.

The cases he'd been on over the years, some easy, some more difficult. Some risking life and limb, although never when he had a partner, or someone he cared about with him.

Like EI.

The image of her smile as she stalked across the room toward him, her naked body his to enjoy, flashed to mind. She'd jumped right in and embraced her cat side and he'd been more than grateful to be the recipient of such amorous attention. Whatever EI did, she did one hundred percent.

He could get to like that. Did like having her around. When all this was over, maybe...

The rumble of a car's motor grew closer. They weren't alone, he and EI. There were other men in position farther down the parkade--some of EI's compatriots she'd called in as backup. She'd insisted they needed to be there, but had managed to convince her chief to keep them far back, as a last-ditch resort. Whatever went down, Kyle would be able to make the decision about how to keep it under control, and he was so grateful she'd understood his point about that. Even as he'd understood why she had to call her captain.

A long black limo rolled around the corner and Kyle whistled softly. Yup, whoever Uncle Roy had connected with was one rich bastard--probably had the cash to make the



deals and hide the bodies no problem. Maybe after this was all over his uncle would actually be thankful for having his butt saved, because guys like this tended to take what they needed then get rid of the evidence.

The car stopped, the front door cracked open and a henchman appeared. His head swiveled like a lighthouse before he stood back and waited for the next move.

Game on. Kyle straightened his spine and stepped into the light.

As he took his first steps to greet the limo, three things happened simultaneously.

The door from the elevators to the right opened and Uncle Roy stepped out, tattered remains of his shirt and tartan clinging to his body, a clear sign the man had recently shifted into cougar while fully dressed.

The passenger door on the far side of the car opened, and in his peripheral vision Kyle spotted a gun rising into the air and swinging in his direction.

And El came out from her hiding spot, and pounced.

Then it was all Matrix-like, with slow-mo bullets, bodies in midflight, sharp sounds smeared into a blur of vibration and deep moaning like rushes. Kyle twisted to the side and threw himself at his uncle, attempting not only to avoid his becoming a pincushion, but to possibly use the man as a temporary hostage. The ground came up far too quickly. Kyle's cat reflexes saved him from a bad crash as he nabbed his uncle and dragged him to the ground. In the distance he heard El's snarl followed by a sound that stuck

terror into his heart.

The report of a gun.

"Ei!" he screamed, his words meshing with the angry screech of a cougar in pain. Uncle Roy ignored, Kyle rose, gun at the ready as he raced for the far side of the limo. Another door snapped open, and this time the sound of gunfire came from behind him, from his uncle's direction. The door snapped shut as another of the bad guys retreated out of the line of fire.

"Damn it, Kyle, you need to get out of here, now. Grab your girl and leave!" Uncle Roy shouted.

The bad guys had hidden in their car. The engine roared to life and the vehicle began to move.

"Uncle, you go. This isn't for you." Kyle snapped off another warning shot at the vehicle, taking out a tire.

"Don't be so stubborn, son. Whatever you've gotten involved in, we can get you out. Now go." Uncle Roy dashed to his side, the ragged flaps of his tattered clothes making him look like a possessed scarecrow.

"Me? You set up this damn meeting." Kyle grabbed his uncle by the shoulder and tugged him behind a pillar as one of the windows slid down a crack and gunshot rang out again. Where the heck was Ei? Kyle chanced a quick glance, looking to spot her body on the ground. There was blood on the concrete, but nothing else, and that's all he had time to see before he had to yank back to avoid a shot to the head.

"What kind of bull is that? I arranged this meeting to get

you out of trouble. Kyle, I'm not trying to tell you how to live your life, but crime doesn't pay, not in the long run."

"Are you insane? What are you talking about?" This whole situation was beyond unbelievable. Below them, tires squealed as the driver attempted to turn the massive vehicle in the limited space. Kyle's heart was in his throat, and even standing shoulder to shoulder with the cause of his dilemma wasn't enough to distract him. "EI? Where the hell are you?"

Ear-shattering noise filled the parkade. The walls echoed from another series of rapid shots as he and Uncle Roy simultaneously took out the back tires of the limo. Smoke rose from one of the holes in the front of the car, a nasty grinding noise indicating they'd hit some vital component in the engine.

The gunshots from the vehicle faded to nothing as wild curses and swearing rose out the open windows.

That's when Kyle spotted EI. She was to his left, stark naked and shaking her head as if she'd witnessed the stupidest thing.

"Boys, you want to pretend for a minute those aren't water pistols you're playing with? Listen up, and quick. You are not enemies. Now cover me." She shifted back into cougar in less time than he could call out her name.

*Shit.*

"Bloody headstrong woman." Kyle leaned around the pillar and took careful aim on the limo.

"She's a handful, all right. Think she's good for you."

Uncle Roy joined him on the other side and Kyle flicked a quick glance at him. Could he trust the man? Then El leapt again, and he had no choice.

She sped forward, landing for a second on the roof of the limo before springing to the side, hiding herself on one of the air vents hanging from the ceiling. She raced around the space, cutting behind pillars, flying from one surface to another, much like he'd admired her doing back in his playroom at the condo. Damn, she was good.

A shot rang from his side and Kyle froze in terror, but the cry of pain came from the shooter in the limo, a bloodied hand retreating, his gun spinning on the concrete where it had fallen.

"You're not doing much covering there, boy," his uncle said. "You want to take the next one, or do I have to do all the work?"

*Son of a bitch.* He'd been so fascinated watching El move. "Bastard."

"So you've told me before." Uncle Roy grinned evilly.

The limo's engine ground out horrible noises, lurching forward a few feet as the bad guys attempted to escape. El taunted them, using her slender cougar body to dash in front of their path before darting behind posts and out of danger at the last possible second. Her movements gave Kyle and his uncle enough time to calmly take shots at any visible body parts offered by the bad guys to their line of fire. Kyle admired the hell out of El—her fluid movements, her fine turns. When she leapt straight at the front

windshield he nearly swallowed his tongue.

The clattering from within the limo died away, the air of the parkade filled with the tortured sounds of the dying engine, steam still billowing from under the hood. El landed lightly in front of the car and padded over to stare in the driver's window. She gave a cry, then returned to the hood, coming down with both paws hard enough to rock the vehicle's suspension. She did it again, snarling loudly.

The doors eased open slowly, empty hands raised in the air like a group of fans at a bad rock concert. El jumped to the side, swatting a shaking bad guy to the ground. The rest of the foursome from within the limo gave up and joined their buddy face down on the hard concrete ground.

Kyle let out the breath he didn't know he'd held. "God, she's gonna be the death of me."

"Welcome to married life. Your aunt kicks my butt a million times a day. You'll get used to it." His uncle's chuckle didn't annoy Kyle so much this time. Must be the sheer relief of having survived whatever the hell had just happened.

Kyle paced forward to where El had shifted and stood patiently. She accepted his gun, keeping it trained on the bad guys as Kyle worked down the line of villains on the ground, searching them for extra weapons. He smacked one of the men who stared at her a little too long. "Stop looking at her."

"Mr. Branegan," El said. "If you leave now you'll have time to change and still make it back to the party for the

midnight toast."

Uncle Roy cleared his throat. "Let me stay and help."

El motioned him to the side and spoke loudly enough for Kyle to hear, but not the men on the ground. "Sir, I don't mean to be rude, but your nephew went out of his way to try and keep the clan strong, in spite of bad feelings between you. Please, don't cause a disturbance tonight. We'll debrief as soon as we can. Kyle and I will return to the party once the perps are in custody. Hopefully no one will have even noticed we were gone. If we don't make it back in time I trust you'll come up with a suitable excuse?"

Uncle Roy nodded then with a flick of his finger against an imaginary cap, he strode back to the elevator doors and disappeared.

\* \* \*

El waited until her contacts in the force had taken off with the foursome they'd arrested before attempting to return the tartan Kyle had draped around her shoulders. The thought that he was trying to keep her covered after spending so much time trying to convince her to act more catlike wasn't lost on her.

"You okay?" Kyle's fingers raced down her arms, searching for any injuries. As he spread his fingers over her hips and smoothed his palms up her back under the fabric, she melted a little.

"Oh yeah, more than okay. And if you keep that up, we're not going to make it back to the party in time for the New

Year's toast. Just saying..." She leaned against his body, breathing in the comforting scent of his skin. She wasn't used to working with a team like that, and definitely not in her cat form. It had been--invigorating.

"I saw blood..."

She stepped back and checked the inside of her arm. "Just winged me. It was already healing when I shifted to human, and was completely better by the second shift to cat. You and your uncle did a good job on the take down."

Kyle shook his head as he tugged her back into the elevator. "What the hell was going on there? I take it my uncle wasn't a part of the actual underground group?"

"Listening to the two of you talk was like a bad comedy routine. It certainly looks as if there's another solution."

"Hopefully we'll get some information from the guys we just arrested. My investigation isn't over yet."

He hit the button for their floor and dragged her back into his arms. It was as if he couldn't bear to be apart from her, and with the adrenaline rush spiking through her veins, she wasn't about to complain.

In fact...

When he got the door to their suite open she jumped him. Sheer relief was part of it, after dealing with the guns and the violence. Clinging to Kyle's uncle, while he had a lot of explainin' to do, was obviously innocent and not a part of the bad guys had made her heart even lighter. Hope rose that a happy ending was possible for this whole mess.

Kyle rumbled with anticipation as she ripped open his

button and zipper and hauled his kilt down his hips. The whole time she stripped him, her thoughts raced. Yeah, a happy ending was a possibility, which meant her time was drawing to a close as well. Now that part of Kyle's investigation was dealt with, they had no justification to continue the facade of their engagement. He had to report for the hearing in January, but she had no reason to doubt he'd show up, even if she stopped babysitting him. The man was reliable, and funny, and...

She was going to miss him like crazy.

The countdown clock was ticking on more than the end of the year.

Kyle hauled her against him. She wrapped her legs around his waist and they got lost in a kiss that threatened to set off the overhead sprinkler system. Their lips continued the erotic tangle as he blindly stumbled back into the bedroom, finally lowering himself on top of her. Every hard, hot inch felt so perfect, she let a long, satisfied moan escape.

He covered her face with kisses. "You were freaking amazing tonight. Watching you work the sting, your cat in control like that? Man, I think you need some serious petting."

One long, sensual lick trailed down her throat as he headed down to other territory, but she was beyond needing foreplay. El cupped his face, forcing his gaze to meet hers.

"All I want is you." The words caught in her throat. He



had no idea how much it cost for her to admit that.

Or maybe he did. His expression changed, the lust-filled cat easing down and a bright light in his eyes making her heart ache. He rose over her, broad hips nestling between her legs as he adjusted position, then with one press, joined them together.

Bliss. Sheer and endless. Every nerve was happy and invigorated. Tingles of pleasure spread out from her core to her extremities. El smiled--she'd never had an orgasm in her fingertips before, but today it seemed likely.

Time slipped away as he moved, fast, then paused to kiss her dreamily, their bodies still connected. Then he stretched his arms to separate their torsos and open the view until they could both watch his cock slip into her sex, her labia open and glistening with moisture.

The digital clock beside the bed changed, and she caught the glowing announcement of yet another deadline.

"We're never...going to make it...to the ballroom in time," she warned. He stroked into her again, and again. Long, languid thrusts that connected them intimately, his torso and hers rubbing together. Suddenly she didn't give a damn about doing the right thing. "Or we can start the New Year right here."

Kyle rolled and brought her into his arms, her body straddling his as he sat on the bed. He directed their motions, his fingers tight on her bare ass cheeks until the clock flicked over, and her body responded. To every touch, every caress, every drive but most of all?

To his lips against her cheek, his voice in her ear, words soft and low.

"Happy New Year's, love."



## Chapter Ten

"How did you get out of the closet?" El perched on the armrest of the overstuffed chair where Kyle sprawled, his belly full of more breakfast than he should have eaten. The entire family was gathered in the salon of Uncle Roy and Auntie Janet's suite, an uneasy truce called by Jake bringing them together as a whole family.

Jake and Conn played a three-handed game of crib at the table with Auntie Janet, the bleary eyes of a cat the-morning-after-the-night-before smearing his middle brother's normally GQ face into a mess. Kyle wondered exactly what Conn had been up to last night that even a shifter metabolism couldn't deal with easily.

"How did I get out? Shifted before I completely passed out. I faked it at first, hoping you were under a deadline and would leave me alone before I went completely unconscious. Whatever you gave me was enough for my human body, but not nearly enough for my cat." Uncle Roy leaned forward on the couch across from them. "We owe the hotel for the repairs to the closet. I broke the doorframe getting out of there. I was desperate to get to the meeting. I figured that must be why you were trying to get me out of the picture."

He turned to Kyle. "About a year ago I got word from a trusted friend who saw you in the middle of a bad situation--you were involved with an unsavory underground element. I

know you and I parted on not the best of terms, and I'd been trying to let you live your life as you saw fit, but I couldn't let you completely go off the deep end. Ever since then I've been trying to find out what you've been up to, and I have to say, you do have some undesirable haunts."

Kyle sighed. He owed El a backrub--she'd told him to expect this. "I work for the Cougar Shifter Investigators, a branch of the Shifter Enforcer League. If you've received reports of me being around sleazy characters, that's probably why."

Uncle Roy's jaw hung open. "The CSI? That exists?"

"Yup, and I'm one of their longest-serving agents. Joined right after I left home. Of course back then I made coffee and did mail runs, but still. They've been great to work with."

El rocked her leg, the motion making her ass rub lightly against his arm. Kyle fought the distraction. They'd spent a little time that morning talking, but skirted around the most important issues until their meeting with Uncle Roy. There was no way to move forward without getting to the bottom of the mystery.

Intent on getting answers, Kyle focused on his uncle again. "I found signs of you during my last investigation. You even set up that meeting last night. What were you thinking?" he demanded.

"I told you, I thought you were in over your head. I was simply trying to get you out and into a safer situation. That's all I've attempted with everything I've arranged." Uncle Roy gestured at El. "The police-authorized supervision, hauling

you away from your normal haunts. I was--"

El stiffened as his uncle spoke, interrupting him with a raised hand. "Excuse me? You want to back up a little? What 'police-authorized supervision' are you talking about arranging?"

The tension in her body was subtle, but Kyle felt it. For a second he thought about stepping in and protecting his uncle from what he suspected might get messy.

Nah, the morning had been kinda slow. Fireworks would be fun. He leaned back to watch the show.

Uncle Roy gave his best cat-in-charge impression. "I had to do something. I know the Chief of the LAPD. When I found out Kyle lived in his area, I asked if there was a legal way to keep Kyle under a kind of house arrest for a while, until I figured out how to deal with the situation. We arranged the incident at the dock, then he assigned one of his best agents to it."

Water could have boiled from the heat rising from El. Kyle sighed. Maybe he should protect his uncle. A death on New Year's Day would spoil the holiday forever.

"It was a...setup? There was no crime? There is no court case in January that I need to make sure Kyle attends?" Her voice was low, almost sweet sounding. Kyle got off the chair and moved for cover. This wasn't going to be pretty.

Uncle Roy shook his finger at her. "Now see here, young lady. I will do whatever it takes to make sure my famil..." His voice died off into a whimper as El flew across the dividing space and put him into a headlock.

She was obviously not too worried she had just attacked the head of the cougar clan. Kyle checked his nails.

"Troubles, Kyle?" Jake asked from the card table.

Kyle glanced down at his uncle on the floor. El had him pinned in place with one hand as he scrambled for air.

"Don't think so. El's just expressing her opinion about Uncle Roy's leadership methods. I think he's getting the point."

"You interfered in my career. I thought it was an honest assignment, and true evidence head office felt I was doing a good job." El shook her head at him in disgust and rose to her feet. "Bastard. I bet the chief was laughing at me behind my back--"

"No." Uncle Roy rubbed his throat, his voice raw as he spoke. He coughed lightly and Kyle took pity on him, reaching out a hand to haul him to his feet. "No, your chief knew nothing more than it was vital to keep Kyle under supervision, and he was to put his best agent on it. The fact he gave you the assignment shows how much he appreciates you."

El crossed her arms and glared at him. "Really. So even though there's no trial, I did a smash-up job. And now I get to go back to work and explain to the rest of my precinct that I was actually playing babysitter to another cat simply because his uncle is a bossy asshole. Nice one. That's going to look real great on my resume."

Uncle Roy raised his finger haughtily, only for a second. Then his eyes widened in panic and he tucked in his hand away faster than Kyle ever remembered the man moving. "It

will not reflect poorly on you. You did your job, excellently, I might add. Your performance down in the parkade was inspired, and I'll be sure to tell your chief that when I--"

She was in his face again, nose to nose. She hissed out the words, the menace clear in spite of the softness of her delivery. "I don't care if you are the head of the clan. You so much as breathe in my chief's direction and I'll make you regret it. This is my life, and I don't accept people messing with it. You got me?"

A palatable tension hung in the air. Kyle glanced past the two staring each other down to discover his brothers and aunt watching intently. He had his fingers crossed. El wouldn't do anything really stupid, and that his uncle was embarrassed enough not to add to his previous mistakes. Conn waved in the background and caught Kyle's eye. His brother jerked his head to the exit door and Kyle nodded. Yeah, maybe the solution was to remove the kindling from the fire.

"Well, now that that's all cleared up. El, can I speak to you privately for a minute?" Kyle nabbed her by the hand and dragged her back toward the door. "Thanks for breakfast, Auntie Janet. Jake, Conn, good to see you as always."

"I wasn't finished," El hissed.

"Oh, I think you made your point. Come on, you need to let Uncle Roy have a little while to consider the folly of his ways. I bet he'll be apologizing and groveling in no time." He pressed a hand on her back to make sure she went out



the door. He twisted to speak over his shoulder to his uncle who stood, still rubbing his throat, a very haunted expression on his face. "But I suggest he not try calling for a few days."

Uncle Roy straightened and nodded briskly, and that was last Kyle saw as he hustled a reluctant El back to their suite.

"I don't know why we left." El grumbled. "I still have questions, plus we need to tell them the engagement is a fake. We'll need your aunt's help to figure out how to announce it's off without causing too big a scene." El pressed past him and kicked off her shoes, collapsing onto the couch with a groan. "I am so not looking forward to the whole media circus all over again. Maybe we should wait a little longer, then say we decided we weren't right for each other or something."

Kyle closed the door. How the hell had she gotten three miles ahead of him in her thinking? He sat on the coffee table in front of her. "Slow down, woman. First, can I make a suggestion? Although I truly appreciated the floor show a few minutes ago--please don't physically attack any clan leaders again, cat or otherwise."

"But--"

"You were totally justified, and I understand completely. Only you were damn lucky he didn't decide to pull rank on you." Kyle chuckled evilly. "I'm not sure why, but seeing you get the jump on him like that? Man, you are one dangerous cougar chick. Watching you made me hot."

A tiny crack of a smile appeared for the first time since she'd heard she'd been set up. "Go on with your big bad self. Everything makes you hot."

Telling remark. Around her, it was certainly true.

He scooted forward to grab her hands. "Hey, I've got an idea and I wanted to ask what you think of it. Your job at LAPD--your favorite part is the undercover work, right?"

She nodded, her head remaining down as she stared as if fascinated by his fingers twining together with hers. He couldn't stop touching her. "Yeah, going undercover was the easiest way to be able to use my cat side without freaking the other officers." She sighed. "I'm dreading going back. There's no need to keep you under wraps anymore, so I should probably call the chief and tell him I'll return to regular duty early next week."

"Or..." Kyle shifted to sit next to her "...you could quit the LAPD and join me instead working for the CSI." She stilled, completely, and he wondered if he'd read her wrong. He thought she would jump at the opportunity. "You don't have to. I mean, I still have to double-check with HQ, but they've never had an issue before when I've brought in help on a part-time basis. This would be a little more formal. Totally up to you." He wasn't about to make the same mistake as his uncle and go over her head.

"You want to work with me?"

*Oh man.* "I'd love to work with you."

El sprang off the couch and paced to the window. Her back was rigid and he longed to go and rub her shoulders.

She was right; there was no reason to pretend to be engaged anymore. Heck, there was no reason they couldn't simply have one last caterwaul together on the back fence, then go their separate ways. Except...waking this morning, wrapped in each other's arms, had felt so right. He'd gotten very used to having her around, and if he was honest, there was no place he'd like El better than at his side.

Throughout the past weeks she'd shown herself to be a blast in bed, street smart enough to complement his lifestyle and more than his match overall. The way she made his hormones race was spine tingling. That tickly sensation in his belly--the one that made him want to cradle her tenderly and keep her happy--he'd never experienced that before.

Maybe the whole falling in love and true mate shit...Maybe it wasn't just for wolves.

Kyle stood and approached her slowly. So he'd have to make some lifestyle adjustments to find a way to make this a reality. He was sure he was smart enough, especially if she helped him.

\* \* \*

"What do you think?" Kyle's hands landed on her shoulders and El took a deep breath. His touch was like a drug, making her hot and cold at the same time. But no matter how much she wanted to simply lean back into him, she had to figure a way out of this whole convoluted mess. Did she want to work with him? Oh hell yeah, but not if that

meant a strictly working relationship.

After finally confessing to herself there was nothing she'd like better than for Kyle to slink his massive cougar body into her bed--and her life--full-time, she didn't want to simply be a work partner. Or just a fuck buddy. No, that wouldn't be enough anymore. She'd come a long way in embracing her cat, but there was something more to what she felt for him than mere kitty pheromones.

She turned and hesitantly rested her hands on his hips. "I can't believe I'm asking this, but do you want me as a business partner, or a partner and something more?"

His dark eyes twinkled, and he raised one hand to cup her chin. His thumb brushed along her jaw line and she fought down the instant desire to purr in response to his touch. There was a hunger in his body, the way he shifted slightly on the balls of his feet as if ready to scoop her up and run.

She didn't feel as if he wanted to run away from her, but run away with her. As his smile broke out, that sexy one with the *ready to fuck now?* written all over it, she knew they were going to be okay.

"Definitely the 'something more,' babe. What do you say? Wanna hang out with me, at the docks, in the bars, behind the computer...in my bed? I'll do my best to make you happy." He held her chin and brushed his lips over hers lightly, a fleeting touch of his mouth. "I'll even ride shotgun if you ask."

Delight bubbled up. "Holy crap, you're serious?"

He laughed out loud. "Serious. And just so you know I'm capable of being a big boy, I'll even put that guy code into words, 'cause I hear chicks like that." He slipped his fingers around the back of her neck, cradling her body closer with his other arm. "Eloise Inez Scott, I have this sneaky suspicion I'm falling in love with you."

Her heart leapt to her throat, pulsing hard.

Hard enough she gagged for a second. Her air passage clogged as she breathed in the wrong way. She coughed frantically. He released her, rubbing her back. "Shit, that bad? Sorry, didn't mean to freak you out or--"

EI waved her hands madly as she tried to speak. "No--" *cough*, "--it's okay. I think--" *cough, cough*, "--me too." She folded in half, hands resting on her knees to clear her lungs. Shit. Her first declaration of love and she was about to choke on her own spit.

*So romantic.*

By the time she could breathe again he'd manhandled her back to the couch and disappeared to get her some water. His hand shook slightly as he passed over the glass, and she looked at him with suspicion.

He snorted. Then a snicker escaped. By the time the guffaws began, EI was able to join in. She cupped his face in her hands and pulled him closer as their mirth poured out.

"Dammit woman, you're hard on a guy's ego."

She tugged him down to the couch and crawled on top of him, straddling his legs and grasping his shoulders firmly

to look him straight in the eye. "Let's recap, shall we? I no longer need to keep an official eye on you for police purposes. You have completed part of your latest CSI assignment, and you're going to check if I can join you in the super secret service. I'm not required to become some kind of society princess and drop a few litters. You will make nice with your family and let me kick your Uncle Roy in the nuts if he ever interferes in our life again."

Kyle was the one to choke this time. "I think Jake will be taking over soon, and there are no worries that he'll interfere with us." She raised a brow. "But yes, if my uncle gets out of line we'll both do something nasty to him, like slip cow laxatives in his drinks or something."

It was all sounding smooth as peaches and cream, but there was one more thing. She looked down at the ring on her finger. The one he'd put there during the "official" engagement party last night. "Can we just shack up for a while?"

He smoothed his palms up and down her arms. "I don't give a damn what we call it, babe. For what it's worth, since we already had the party we can say we're engaged and leave it at that. A ring, or a ceremony, or whatever, makes no difference to me. What I'm feeling for you has nothing to do with an official piece of paper and everything to do with who you are."

She tugged the ring off and looked at it closely. It sparkled, but she was still too damn scared to put aside all her fears that zombiehood waited one irrevocable step

past "I do." El nodded slowly then took his hand and tucked the ring into it. "Let's do it this way. No ring. We shack up. Let the media deal with that however they want and we'll take this as it comes."

Kyle caught her fingers in his and kissed them gently. "Okay. Whatever makes you happy. But one more deal. As soon as you're comfortable, I want to give you something to show you I'm serious about you. Maybe not a ring, but...when we figure it out, we'll know. Okay?"

El smiled at him. "I can accept those terms. Last thing. No kittens for a while."

Kyle's eyes widened. "Holy hell, no. I mean, someday, sure, but not yet. Like...down the road when we're bored of slinking down back alleys and hopping on planes to Venice at a moment's notice."

*Interesting.* "That's a common part of the CSI job?"

"What, the alleys? Or Venice?"

"Both."

He unbuttoned her shirt and she squirmed slightly, other interesting things rising between them as he slid the fabric from her shoulders. "You never know where we'll need to go. Personally, I'm fond of the trips to France. There's this great little bistro on the Champs-Elysees that I think you'll enjoy."

She was busy as well, yanking his T-shirt from his pants and wrangling it off his torso. *Paris?* "What's their specialty?"

"Eclairs. With lots and lots of cream."

He rolled her under him, magically stripping off her remaining clothing. "I can handle that," she said, pulling him hard against her. There was far too much to celebrate right now to be worrying about the little details. Then again, maybe the little details had all been taken care of.

And the cream seemed to have risen to the top.





## **About the Author**

Vivian Arend has hiked, biked, skied and paddled her way around most of North America and parts of Europe. Taking the road less traveled has provided plenty of exciting experiences and outstanding panoramic settings for her stories. Paranormal and red-hot contemporaries, usually in small town or rural locations, are her favorite genres to write.

Vivian lives in Western Canada with her longtime sweetie, two wonderful kids and a dog that looks like a stuffed toy. She loves to hear from readers. The best place to come and visit is <http://vivianarend.com>. You can contact her via the link on her website.





## **No Angel**

**By Vivi Andrews**

When Sasha's boyfriend, Jay, is sucked through a fiery vortex to Hell, an angel reveals that Sasha's been chosen as the Champion of Virtue in the battle for his immortal soul. As a perennial offender on Santa's naughty list, Sasha can't believe she's anyone's idea of a girl fighting on the side of the angels. But if she doesn't save Jay, he'll be stuck in Hell forever!

Jay--aka Jevroth--isn't surprised to find himself back in Hell. His visa to visit the mortal plane expired three months ago, but to steal more time with Sasha he's been ignoring his mother's demands that he come home to spend time with his new stepfather: Lucifer.

Sasha has until dawn on the twenty-fifth of December to fight the Legions of Hell and rescue Jay, or be trapped there for eternity herself. But now she must decide if the lying son-of-a-demon is even worth saving...



## **Dedication**

For my brother, who always held the other end of the garland as we decked the halls, and my sister, who makes cookie decorating an art form. Thanks for all the holiday memories--and for not spilling the beans about the Santa Claus thing.



## Chapter One

### Cloudy with a Chance of Angels

On the day Sasha Christian's boyfriend got sucked into the fiery maw of Hell, she baked cookies.

This is not to say baking cookies will trigger abduction into the Underworld, but it is important to understand that this was not the sort of day on which one might expect one's significant other to be kidnapped by demonic forces.

It was a Tuesday. And Christmas Eve.

Thirty minutes prior to the abduction, Sasha stood in the ten-items-or-less line at Ralph's, holding a single bottle of molasses and fighting the temptation to count the items in the basket of the woman in front of her.

If she counted even eleven items, Sasha didn't think she'd be able to stop herself from tackling the woman and bludgeoning her with her own canned yams until she retreated in blood-spattered shame to the three-mile-long non-express line. Since this would likely result in Sasha's ejection from Ralph's and force her to locate another grocery open at four-twenty on Christmas Eve where she could buy unsulfated molasses to finish her gingerbread cookies, she decided it was best to avert her eyes.

Instead, Sasha concentrated on the flat-screen above the checkstand where a twenty-four-hour news channel recapped the holiday frenzy in a highlight reel. Tinsel, holly, rosy-cheeked celebrity faces, blah blah blah.



She'd already seen the segment twice. Her oh-so-brilliant idea to pop out to the store had turned into a marathon shopping expedition. Just finding a parking space had taken more time than she'd planned for the entire trip.

Damn holiday crowds.

Sasha gritted her teeth and reminded herself that she *loved* the holidays. Jay was the Grinch in their relationship. During the rest of the year she might be the misanthropic one, but at Christmastime she was Tiny Tim, bouncing around God-bless-us-ing everyone...when she wasn't entertaining violent fantasies about women who got in the ten-items-or-less line with *at least* eleven items, making her even later than she already was.

Four-twenty. Jay was due at her place in ten minutes and instead of the Christmas utopia she'd planned as a surprise for her bah-humbug boyfriend, he would find an empty apartment with a bowl of gingerbread goo in the kitchen.

If the apartment was still there at all. Sasha was reasonably certain she'd left the oven on.

The fact the news channel hadn't broken in with a live aerial shot of her apartment building in flames was somewhat comforting. The holiday montage continued with footage of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels from earlier that afternoon.

A slow, panning shot of the courtyard showed a throng worthy of Times Square on New Year's Eve, jostling and

chorusing a barely identifiable rendition of "Hark the Herald" as they stared skyward. The first angel mass always did draw a crowd.

Dark clouds--imported from Seattle for the occasion, no doubt--layered the Los Angeles sky above the blocky, geometric cathedral. On cue, as the bells began to peal, a hole opened in the clouds like a camera iris widening. Spears of sunlight streaked down to gild the tan stone of the cathedral, lighting the alabaster cross that thrust out over the plaza, but no one in the crowded courtyard was looking at the building.

All eyes were on the gap expanding in the clouds as a figure appeared, riding the rays of light.

Gold-kissed wings spread wide in an eight-foot span to slow his approach until the white-robed figure seemed to float on his graceful descent from the heavens.

Sasha rolled her eyes. *How cliché can you get?* Trust an angel to play it up for the crowd. The holier-than-thou bastards were worse than starlets when it came to mugging for the cameras.

Sasha squinted, trying to identify the wings. Michael? Gabriel? L.A. always ranked an Arch at their angel mass, but they rotated through, taking turns awing the gullible masses into submission. Sasha was far from wowed. She'd been surrounded by the facade of celebrity for too long to be impressed by flashy PR stunts.

The robes, the layered clouds, even the angle of the sun had all been contrived to match Michelangelo's famous

painting of the angels' First Appearance. Every detail was choreographed to remind mere mortals how grateful they should be for the Angelic Intervention of the fifteenth century, when the heavenly host revealed themselves to mankind, exposed the demons living in secret among humans and banished them from the earthly plane.

In their appearances during the rest of the year, angels were just as likely as mortal celebs to be photographed in designer jeans and couture gowns--specially tailored to allow for wings, of course--but around the holidays they always upped the pageantry and went biblical. Halos, sandals, togas, the whole nine yards.

And their adoring public ate it up. Even if the heavenly host hadn't done anything more useful in the last four hundred years than cut a few ceremonial ribbons and pose for the fawning masses.

Angels. Just another brand of L.A. fame whore.

"Aren't they magnificent?" A gusty sigh whooshed past Sasha's ear, eating into her personal space. "I swear I'll never get used to seeing them flying above the city. My heart just races every time I see wings."

*Great. An angel groupie.* This really was her lucky day.

Sasha made a vaguely affirmative humming noise, smiling without turning her head as she sidled away from the confidences of the chick behind her in line.

Her new best friend closed the gap with a sidestep. "Do you go to the angel masses? I haven't missed a single holy day since I moved out here from Tulsa."

## *Why are they always from Tulsa?*

Sasha was not the kind of girl who bonded with people in checkout lines--no matter how excruciatingly long they might be. Maybe the Angel Lover breathing down her neck was just feeling friendly--*please, let it be that*--but in the best-case scenario they'd only be besties for another ten minutes and she didn't see the point in bonding.

Sasha eyed the line. Maybe fifteen minutes.

Worse, and far more likely, was the possibility Miss Tulsa had finally placed Sasha's face. And its relationship to her mother's face. By the time they got to the front of the line, it would be "Could you just pass my screenplay along?" or "I bet you know lots of casting agents."

The line inched up and Sasha shuffled forward, putting as much distance between herself and the Angel Lover as possible--for the two-point-five seconds before Miss Tulsa stepped forward and nudged her arm. Sasha glanced in her direction with a porcelain smile frozen on her face and her mother's voice echoing in her head. *Be a doll and smile for the people, baby. We don't want them to think we're aloof.*

Her mother hated aloof. It ranked among her favorite complaints. *You're so guarded, Sasha. Would it kill you to show a little warmth and vulnerability?*

Miss Tulsa looked like she'd never been called *aloof* in her life. Wholesome, Midwestern beauty. Early twenties, but short enough that she could play younger--or opposite Tom

Cruise without him standing on apple crates for the close-ups. Hopeful. Bright-eyed.

Classic actress hyphenate. Actress-waitress, actress-barista. Sasha gave her three minutes before she pulled a headshot out of her shoulder bag and began begging.

"Do you? Go to the angel mass?" Miss Tulsa giggled--a coy, practiced sound.

*She must be going for high-school roles.*

The pride of Oklahoma sighed enviously. "The angels probably come to your house for Christmas dinner. They say even the Arches stop and stare when Layla Christian walks down the street."

And there it was. Miss Tulsa needed to work on her timing. She'd jumped her cue. Desperation could do that to a girl.

"She's something," Sasha agreed and flicked her gaze back up to the flat-screen, giving up on smiling and reverting to stay-away-from-me-you-grasping-wannabe now that Miss Tulsa had tipped her hand. She was so not in the mood for this shit today.

Miss Tulsa giggled again, still working the angel angle. "You've met one, haven't you? What do their wings look like in person?"

Why did everyone always assume all celebrities knew each other? Like once you'd achieved a certain level of fame, you became instant BFFs with every other figure in the public eye.

"No idea," Sasha replied without taking her eyes from

the screen. "I've never seen an angel up close." Unless you counted her mother, and many people did, though the "Angel of Hollywood" had never had wings.

"Never?" Miss Tulsa gasped in shock. "You're kidding me. Aren't you Layla Christian's daughter?"

Of course she had to say it at a decibel to rattle the windows. Sasha was suddenly the focus of every eye in the Malibu Ralph's. "Christmas Eve in Sarajevo" sounded freakishly loud over the store's PA as all impatient shuffling and rustling abruptly stopped. The woman with *at least* eleven items in her basket twisted around in front of Sasha and openly gaped.

*Oh, joy.* So much for incognito.

"I know it's you. I saw you on that Barbara Walters special about Hollywood dynasties." Miss Tulsa's hand crept toward her shoulder bag. Sasha was impressed she managed to restrain herself from whipping out her headshot right then and there. "You're in the biz, too, aren't you?"

"Sort of," Sasha mumbled, fighting the urge to duck her head to hide her face, empathizing with microscope slides. *My life, the spectator sport.*

If only she could be openly rude without it ending up in the tabloids and getting back to her mother. She could hear the lecture now. *We can't afford to be seen as ungrateful, Sasha. Perception is everything.*

A man in line at checkstand four waved his iPhone in what was clearly supposed to be a casual gesture, as if she

wouldn't notice he was taking her picture. Sasha wondered what the odds were that this entire episode wouldn't be up on somebody's blog complete with photos by the time she got back to her--possibly burned down--apartment.

Miss Tulsa the Angel Lover wrinkled her nose. "Do you do those boring indie movies? Is that why I haven't seen you in anything?"

A font of culture and taste, that Miss Tulsa. "I'm not an actress."

Tulsa tipped her head, playing up her lack of comprehension for their viewing audience. You never knew when a casting agent was watching. "Why not? You're super pretty."

"Thanks." Sasha decided not to explain there might be a little something more to being an actress than looking good. It would be too much like telling a kid Santa Claus didn't exist, and it *was* Christmas Eve.

"You really aren't an actress?"

Sasha glanced to the front of the express lane where even the cashier was stealing looks toward them between scanning items. "Stunts," she said curtly, hoping the relative lack of glamour in her chosen profession would get the attention off her.

Tulsa gasped, horrified. "You mean you do all the crazy, dangerous stuff and then they edit out your face so no one even knows it was you?"

Sasha's mouth quirked in a genuine smile. "Yep." It was a pretty good description of her job--especially if you added

*explaining to idiot actors hownot to shoot themselves in the face with prop guns and blowing stuff up for fun.*

"Couldn't your mom get you an acting gig? I mean, doesn't she try to talk you into doing something safer?"

*Only every single day for the last six years--though* neither of them had ever publicly said anything other than the PR-approved statement Sasha spoke now. "She's very proud of me."

Even if Layla vocally bemoaned her daughter's disinterest in ballet and Shakespeare, she'd still cheered at every karate tournament and fencing meet. She may have longed for a precious little angel in her own image, but her mother barely flinched when Sasha begged for a membership to a gun range for her sixteenth birthday.

"But why doesn't she want you to be a star? Doesn't she want you to be happy?"

Sasha set the molasses bottle on the conveyor belt and reminded herself that shattering hopes and dreams was bad Christmas karma--even when those dreams really ought to be shattered for the good of the dreamer. If Miss Tulsa believed being famous would make her deliriously happy, wouldn't Sasha be doing her a service to clue her in to the reality?

The total lack of privacy, being treated like a sideshow act every day of your life and harassed by random strangers in the checkout line at Ralph's...Oh yeah, that was the definition of bliss right there.

Only the cheerful ring of her cell phone saved her from



pulling a Grinch and popping Miss Tulsa's fame bubble. *Thank God, a distraction.* Sasha made an apologetic face and dug into her purse. One look at the caller ID and she almost wished she hadn't heard it ring.

"Hello, Joan. Did you pick up my dry cleaning?"

The spectators to her life who were leaning in, eager to eavesdrop on the conversation, sighed and looked away, disappointed by the normalcy of her greeting.

On the other end of the line, her mother huffed. "Why are you using my incognito name? Who's listening? You told me you were staying home all day baking."

"Joan..."

"I do wish you would stop calling me that. The *Mommie Dearest* crack has never been funny."

"I happen to think it's hysterical."

"Your sense of humor is defective. Just like your father's. Now why would you lie to your mother on Christmas Eve?"

"I didn't lie. I ran out of molasses."

"Is that code for something? Like the dry cleaning thing? I never could remember those silly codes."

Sasha rolled her eyes. "It's an ingredient, Mo--ahem, Joan. I need it to finish the gingerbread."

"I don't understand this domesticity fetish of yours," said the woman whose definition of *baking* consisted of requesting a special pastry from her private chef.

"It's called normalcy, Joan. You should look into it."

"Normalcy is for other people. You're special, baby. You deserve the extraordinary."

*Special* sucked most days, but this was not a conversation Sasha wanted to have standing in line at Ralph's. Besides, it was almost her turn. Eleven-items-or-more was handing her rewards card to the cashier as she spoke. "Was there a reason for this call?"

"I just wanted to find out what time you and Jay would be over in the morning."

Sasha ground her molars and reminded herself that matricide was morally wrong, no matter how appealing it sounded. "We've been over this." *Repeatedly*. "Jay can't make it."

"Well, yes, you did say that, but I thought you would come to your senses. Just the thought of that poor boy all alone on Christmas Day with no family..."

Sasha pinched the bridge of her nose, feeling a headache coming on. The ache was familiar--the pain of dealing with a woman no one in the world ever said no to. "Joan, nix the dramatics."

"I can't sleep, I can't eat. I can't stop thinking about his sad, lonely Christmas. And the more I think about it, the more I wonder why my baby refuses to introduce her boyfriend to her mother. Which one of us are you ashamed of?"

Sasha groaned. No one could guilt trip quite like a professional drama queen. "Neither. It isn't a conspiracy. He just can't come."

It wasn't like she hadn't asked. And asked. And asked. Never let it be said that Sasha Christian gave up easily.

"Is he deformed?"

"Oh for the love of God. No horns. No cloven hooves, I promise. He just has other plans."

*Which he refused to tell me about.* But she wasn't going to read anything into that. It wasn't a red flag that he wanted out of their relationship. It *wasn't*, dammit.

Jay was the first guy she'd met in years who wasn't using her to get close to her famous family. The first guy she'd trusted enough to actually start caring about--with all the frustrating vulnerability that entailed. But she refused to entertain any fears of being dumped on Christmas Eve.

So what if he'd been acting edgy and evasive for weeks? It was just holiday-induced weirdness, nothing to worry about. Yes, lately she had been self-medicating with compulsive holiday baking as she waited for the ax to fall on their relationship. But everything was *fine*.

Even if he was too damn nice for her.

And even if he had said he wanted to come over tonight because they "needed to talk." Because conversations starting with *those* words never ended badly.

"Six months," her mother wailed, clearly enjoying her own dramatics. "Six months and I haven't seen anything more than a blurry picture of the latest hot biker MBA."

"He isn't a biker. We met in a library, for Chrissake."

"I thought that was just a cover story to tell your father. Mythical librarians aren't usually your type, are they, sweetie?"

"I don't have a type." Which was a bald-faced lie and

they both knew it. Sasha was a sucker for bad boys. All hot leather and tough-guy sex appeal. Jay was...a boy she'd met in a library. Sometimes even she wondered what she was doing with a cupcake like him. "And he isn't mythical."

"He's mythical until you introduce him to me."

"He exists, Joan. Shockingly, reality doesn't hinge on your awareness of it."

"I see, therefore he is," Layla announced theatrically. "I want to meet this boy, Sasha. I won't be stalled."

"Do you want a bag for this, Miss Christian?"

Sasha looked up to find the cashier watching her expectantly, holding her molasses. "Crap. Joan, I've gotta go. I'll see you tomorrow around ten, okay?"

"With Jay."

From the way Jay'd been talking lately, seeing him tomorrow morning would be a bona fide Christmas miracle. Sasha was just hoping she wouldn't be crying into her eggnog.

"Goodbye, Joan." Sasha punched the end button and smiled at the cashier. "Sorry about that. No bag, thanks." Then she realized the cashier was scanning Miss Tulsa's items. "Oh sorry, I'm just the molasses."

She pulled out a ten, but Miss Tulsa the Angel Lover caught her wrist. Sasha stiffened. She hated being groped by strangers--a lifetime of being jostled by paparazzi could do that to a girl.

"No, no, sweetie, you let me get this for you," Miss Tulsa gushed.

"Thanks, but I would rather--"

"I *insist*," she cooed. "How often does a girl get to chat with someone who knows *the* Layla Christian?"

Sasha forced a smile. "I appreciate the sentiment, but I would really prefer to pay for my own mo--"

"Nonsense!" Miss Tulsa barked, her Midwestern wholesomeness cracking a bit under the force of the word. "You're going to let me get this for you. In the spirit of Christmas."

Sasha wanted to believe this sudden fit of charity was motivated by the Christmas spirit. She really did. But life had taught her there was no such thing as free favors. Every good intention came with a price. Miss Tulsa's came out of her shoulder bag in the form of a homemade DVD in a pink jewel case.

"Oh, look at that! I totally forgot I had this with me."

God, she was a terrible actress. Even being cute wasn't going to help her in this town if she couldn't lie any better than that.

"You will let me give you my reel, won't you, Miss Christian? Like a gift." She giggled. "After all, it is the season of giving."

Sasha gritted her teeth as she smiled, somehow managing not to *give* Miss Tulsa a mouthful of knuckles.



## Chapter Two

### Mistletoe & Mephistopheles

Jay leaned against the hood of his car, staring across the street at Sasha's apartment building. She'd been expecting him ten minutes ago and for the past six months he'd made a point never to be late. Not once.

Since the second he'd laid eyes on Sasha, Jay had redefined his standards for best behavior. He'd been the considerate boyfriend. The good listener. The new Jay made Dr. Phil look like an insensitive prick.

And it was all a fucking lie.

He'd arrived early, as usual, and for the last twenty minutes Jay had gazed at her building with stalkerish intensity. He needed to go over there and confess everything before the neighbors called the cops, but his feet refused to move.

Guilt-induced paralysis.

Jay hadn't intentionally broken the first and only rule in his dating book: *Thou shalt not lie to your girlfriend about the fact you are half demon*. But it just sort of happened. Accidental deceit. And somehow he didn't think Sasha would accept "I'm sorry, baby, I really meant to tell you my mother is a soul-sucking demon queen" as a harmless little misunderstanding.

Knowing demons exist in Hell and take periodic field trips to the mortal plane to cause mischief is one thing.

Dating a guy with a demonic pedigree is something else entirely.

It didn't help the situation that demons had the crappiest PR image in the history of the world. The holier-than-it-all angels worked the press, keeping a sparkling reputation in spite of all the shit they'd done over the millennia. They rubbed elbows with celebs and lapped up adoration as if it was their due.

The demonic approach had always been to cloak yourself in mystery. The less your enemies knew, the greater your strategic advantage. But secretiveness as a public-relations tactic sucked. Deserved or not--and yeah, sometimes it was deserved--demons had become the public face for all things evil.

Jay wasn't usually squeamish about facing the music--a demon didn't last long in Hell if he couldn't lie his way out of trouble--but he wasn't usually facing someone he would rather cut off his arm than hurt either. Dread locked his muscles into immobility at the thought of coming clean, but he couldn't put it off any longer. He had a deadline--emphasis on dead. *Fucking Christmas.*

His cell phone rang in his pocket and Jay dove for it with cowardly enthusiasm. "Verin."

"I thought I told you never to use that freaky-ass psychic shit on me," his cousin's raspy alto grumbled in his ear.

"Caller ID," Jay lied. "You back already?"

"Home for the holidays. Deck the Hells." Verin gave a short, wry laugh at her own quip. "I thought you might like to



know your mother is having a shit fit because you aren't here kissing her ring for everyone to see."

Jay winced. "What's the damage so far?"

His mother had never been a particularly maternal creature. He didn't delude himself that she actually wanted him by her side for any reason other than to solidify her political standing. Jezebeth had always been ambitious, but in this last year her grabs for power had been surprisingly successful, finally resulting in her new marriage and a tenuous position of power at her husband's side. Her only child refusing to come home to pay homage must burn like acid.

"A few priceless relics shattered against the walls. Antique furnishings thrown into the fire," Verin said. "But if I were you I'd be more worried that she went quiet about an hour ago and no one's seen her since. What are you still doing up there? I suppose sweet Sasha took the news badly."

He considered lying, but a part of him actually wanted Verin's advice--useless though it would probably be--on how to broach things with her. "I haven't told her yet."

Verin's laugh rippled in his ear. "You are such a pussy. Better get that ass in gear, cos. The clock is ticking."

"I know."

"What's the hold up?" Verin's impatience crackled in her voice. "Lucifer's boots, Jevroth, don't tell me you *like* her. A little human fling is one thing, but don't start going native on me. You're the only semi-tolerable part of family gatherings."

I'd hate to see you incinerated by the wrath of God just because you started doing your thinking below the belt."

"I'm not going native," Jay growled. He wasn't a fucking idiot. He knew the consequences better than anyone, but... "I don't know how to tell her."

"What is there to tell? Break it off, come home, never see her again. Easy. Use 'it's not you, it's me.' That's one of my favorites. Or if you need to give her a story, tell her you're a Russian spy. Or married. Or a married Russian spy. Who cares what you tell her?"

*I care.* Which was new. And distinctly unsettling. "She needs to know the truth."

"Do you honestly think learning her beloved shnookykins is hellspawn is going to make her remember you fondly when you're gone?"

"It's not when I'm gone I'm worried about."

Verin groaned into the phone. "Jay. Buddy. You can't see her again after this. You know the rules. There's no coming back. You had your sabbatical. Tell her you'll always have Paris or whatever, but get the fuck out of there."

Jay did know the rules, but the beauty of Hell was that every rule could be bent and most of them broken. He had a plan. Blackmail, manipulation, whatever it took, he was going to be back on the mortal plane after Christmas. Back with Sasha.

A crash sounded on the other end of the line. "Shit. Better make it snappy, Jay," Verin said, "before Auntie Jezebeth breaks out the torture devices to cheer herself

up."

"I'd be snappier if you weren't keeping me on the phone."

Verin snorted. "Excuses, excuses. Tick, tock, dumbass."

"Love you, too, cos."

Jay disconnected and shoved the phone back into his pocket, his feet still rooted to the ground. He was late enough Sasha had probably filed a missing person report by now, but he couldn't make his feet take the steps that would end their relationship.

If they ended it. Maybe Sasha would understand. Maybe she would be cool with his unconventional background. And the fact he'd lied to her for six months.

*Surprise, baby. I forgot to mention I'm a demon-human superhybrid being used as a pawn in a political battle in the demonic realm and my visa to stay on the mortal plane just expired. But don't worry, just because I'm demonspawn and forbidden from remaining on the mortal plane on Christmas Day doesn't mean I don't care about you. I just have to return to Hell by dawn and I'm not sure if I'll ever be able to get back out again, but it's nothing to worry about.*

Yeah, that was gonna go over like a dream. She'd have no problem whatsoever with the fact he was spawned of pure evil. What girl wouldn't want to take *that* home to Mother?

Jay pushed off from the car, glancing both ways before

jaywalking. He was halfway across the street when a silver sports car skidded around the corner at NASCAR speeds. Jay grinned—even if he hadn't recognized the car, the driving was unmistakable. He paused on the grassy median, a smile on his face as he watched Sasha's car rock on to two wheels when she pulled a tight U-turn into her parking space. She was out of the car before the engine had stopped making the whirring jet-engine noise and he could hear her swearing like a dockworker as she took the steps up to her place two at a time.

*Damn, he loved that woman.*

His mouth went dry and his heart lurched at the sudden, sharp clarity of the thought.

*Fuck.* That was trouble. Six months ago, his impulse to stay on the mortal plane had been based on a whim, a fleeting desire for a holiday from the court intrigues and manipulations that dominated the demonic realm. He'd half expected to grow bored with living as a human, but then he'd met Sasha.

He'd sensed the light in her and thought he could use her to stay on the mortal plane, but he hadn't expected to actually like her. And he certainly hadn't meant to fall for her.

The constant tug-of-war between her dark, sarcastic humor and the better angels of her nature had instantly fascinated him. She was slow to trust but quick to laugh, and his fascination slowly developed into something deeper. Something he hesitated to put a name on.

Sasha complicated everything, making the impossible

seem possible and giving him a reason to want it.

Jay jogged across the street and up the stairs. The key she'd made him was in his hand, but she'd left the door unlocked. He pushed it open, ducking to avoid gouging his eyes out on the spears of mistletoe tacked to the frame.

A muted litany of curses flowed through the door to the kitchen, apparently centering around the city of Tulsa and Joan Crawford and providing an odd counterpoint to the jeering cheerfulness of "Jingle Bells" playing on the stereo.

Jay tossed his keys on the hall table and followed the sound of Sasha's voice, pausing for a moment in the living room to stare out the window. The apartment was small enough to be a testament to her stubborn independence from her family's wealth, but it had a million-dollar view. Through the bay windows, the sun dipped low over the Pacific, painting the cloud and smog cover with ambers, pinks and purples.

You didn't get sunsets like that in Hell. It might be the last one he saw in who knew how long, but he couldn't stop to admire it. The clock was ticking.

Jay rounded the living room couch and stepped into the kitchen doorway, leaning his shoulder against the frame. Sasha stood at the island, muttering viciously about blowing up Tulsa for the good of humanity.

Jay smiled. "You got something against Oklahoma?"

Her monologue cut off midcourse. Her head snapped up and wary eyes locked on his. "Jay." Hands covered in sticky brown goo froze in the glass mixing bowl.

Six months and she still reacted when he walked in the room. He knew the feeling. Six months and the sight of her still hit him in the gut.

The sweet dimples, softly curved face and naturally high eyebrows made her always seem delighted by life. He loved the deception of that angelic face. Her wit was quick and vicious, her temperament volatile, but there was a core of goodness in her that made him feel like he could never quite be good enough, nice enough, *pure* enough for her. He was a demon, after all.

She'd swept her auburn waves into a messy topknot and wore her standard uniform of ribbed black tank top, snug jeans and high-heeled black boots--the only variations were a Santa-red scarf twisted around her neck and a wide, gaudy belt with I've Got Your Ho-Ho-Ho Right Here bejeweled into the red leather. Her Kitchen Bitch apron had been thrown aside and hung crookedly over a barstool.

Her eyes flicked over his face, reading every nuance of expression there. He didn't know what she saw, but it made her jaw tighten for a fraction of a second before a wry smile twisted her lips.

"My mother's starting to think I made you up," she said lightly, the words landing somewhere between a joke and an accusation.

The comment was a test. He'd been through enough tense diplomatic negotiations in Hell to recognize that much. It was up to him to decide how he wanted to take it. She looked down at her hands, as if she didn't want to

influence him one way or the other, kneading the brown dough.

Instinct urged him to say what needed to be said and go, get it over with, even if it meant getting *them* over with.

But he was selfish enough to steal a little more time. He came around the narrow island to stand behind her, sliding his arms around her waist and pressing his face into the curve of her neck. "Your mother has talked to me on the phone."

"Hmm." Sasha tipped her head to give him better access, though she didn't stop kneading the dough, and she didn't lean into him. Always standing on her own two feet. Never letting him support her.

The scent of her skin mingled with the smells of the kitchen, a combination that had insinuated its way into his definitions of home and happiness over the last few months. He tried to memorize this moment, the texture of it, so he could find his way back here again.

"Tulsa's getting nuked?" he murmured against her skin.

Sasha punched the gooey dough. "Another stars-in-her-eyes hopeful from Oklahoma made a spectacle of me at the supermarket. Same old, same old."

She shrugged as if it didn't touch her, but he could hear the tension in her voice, the frustration. He tightened his arms, wanting to wrap her in comfort and battle all her demons--but he was the only demon here.

It was probably wrong to want one last night with her before he told her the truth, but his moral compass had

never pointed due north and Sasha defined temptation. He slipped his hands beneath her shirt, over the smooth, soft skin of her stomach.

"I could have paid some guy off the street twenty bucks to pretend to be you on the phone," she said, bringing the conversation back to her mother. Again.

The same mother who would probably peg him as a demon at thirty paces. Layla Christian might look like an angel, but Jay didn't fool himself that she wouldn't rip out his entrails with her bare hands when she found out her baby had been seduced by demonspawn.

Jay's hands stilled.

"I suppose I could do that for tomorrow," Sasha mused. "You can't walk two feet in this town without bumping into an actor. They'd probably pay me just for the chance to be in the same room with my mother. Playing you would be the ultimate method-acting exercise."

"You aren't hiring anyone to be me," he grumbled against her neck, his body close enough to feel the shiver that rolled down her spine in reaction.

"No? Somehow I doubt that means you've changed your mind and decided to have Christmas with us." She shrugged him off, making it seem like she was only reaching for the rolling pin, but he could tell she was hurt by his refusal.

Sasha didn't let people in easily--asking him for this was as vulnerable as she'd let herself be in the entire six months of their relationship. It killed him every time he had to say no



and watch her walls go up again, higher each time.

And they were definitely up now. So much for one last night. She rounded the corner of the counter and Jay didn't try to close the distance. He doubted she would want him touching her for what he said next. *Better get it over with...*

"Sasha, I might have to be out of touch for a while. I'm heading out of town," he began, meaning to work his way up to the whole demonspawn thing. Frustration at what he had to do roughened his voice and gave it a brutal edge.

Sasha stiffened, her gaze locked on the wad of brown dough, her knuckles going white with the force of her grip on the rolling pin. "That's right. How could I have forgotten? We 'need to talk,' don't we?"

Jay took a step back to get out of rolling pin range. Okay, clearly he should have phrased that differently.

"When do you leave?"

"I have to go tonight." *Or I'll be smote to the lowest level of Hell by the wrath of God because I'm evil-begotten.* Probably best to save that tidbit until she wasn't armed.

"Are you coming back?" The question was a projectile, flung at his face.

"Yes." Unless he couldn't. Nothing was certain in Hell. "I want to. I'm going to try."

"Right."

Jay winced at the bite in her tone. He'd been hoping to ease her into his revelations a little at a time, but he should have known better. Sasha never took the easy way.

Sasha didn't know what it was that made her want to pounce on Jay and start a fight.

Maybe it was a reflexive *dump him before he can dump you*. Maybe it was defensive anxiety because he was the only man she'd ever met who could make an ache start up in her chest when he walked into the room or her fingertips tingle every time he touched her. The only one she'd let get close enough to hurt her.

Maybe it was just the knowledge he'd always been too sweet for her and she'd always known it. He was too gorgeous. *Way* too nice. Too much of a good guy for a temperamental bitch like her. Saint Jay.

Saints belonged with nice girls--and nice girls didn't fantasize about bludgeoning strangers with canned goods or ripping the fingernails off Hollywood hopefuls from Oklahoma.

So what if she might be a little head over heels for him? It's not like he was perfect. He couldn't commit and he was too inclined to let her walk all over him, though sometimes she got the strangest sense he was forcing himself to be a doormat.

It was almost like he was two people--the Jay who was the poster child for thoughtfulness and responsibility, and the one with the wicked smile and subtle manipulations. Those little hints of devilishness that made her feel like he understood every dark corner of her soul and loved her

vices as much as her virtues.

Sasha wasn't the kind of girl who had the milk of human kindness flowing through every vein--and she needed to be with someone who wasn't going to make her feel guilty for the lack. She wanted someone who pushed back when she pushed, a tough guy who could give her the friction of pitting her will against his--though lack of sexual friction had never been a problem for them.

When Jay had appeared in the kitchen, for a second she'd forgotten to be defensive. Forgotten to brace for the worst. Forgotten "we need to talk."

The sunset streaming in the windows behind him made Jay look like an angel stepping out of a beam of light. It accented the muscular curve of his shoulders and caressed the matinee-idol slant of his jaw. The words *tall*, *dark* and *handsome* had been invented for this man. His hair and eyes were both wholly, deliciously black.

With his dark, sculpted features, he looked like sin. But looks could be deceiving. Jay was the nice one.

And she was the one spoiling for a fight. Anger would keep her strong, keep her from sniveling all over him. If he was leaving, she wasn't inclined to make it easy.

"So. *Going out of town*. Is that like 'I have plans for Christmas'? Some kind of guy code? It's not me, it's you, right?" She looked down at her hands, remembering the gingerbread dough. *Baking therapy*. She focused on it so she wouldn't have to look at him, rolling it out with short, aggressive strokes.

"Sasha..." His voice was low, serious, without any of the usual laughing undertones that could make her smile even when she wanted to be mad at him. "It's complicated--"

That empty tone, more than anything else, sounded the death knell of their relationship. He really was about to break up with her. *On Christmas fucking Eve. No way.* Her throat closed off and her hands tightened convulsively on the rolling pin.

"Oh, I know it's complicated." She heard herself cut him off, shoving words into his mouth, even though she had fully intended to let him speak. But once she was started, the words just kept coming, punctuated by the repetitive thump of the rolling pin hitting the dough. "Didn't anyone ever tell you the best lies are simple, Jay? It's the complicated ones that trip you up. Like you really shouldn't tell your girlfriend an elaborate story about not having any family left in this world and how you never do anything special for Christmas, and then expect her to buy some bullshit excuse about mysterious long-standing plans when she wants you to meet her family."

She'd rolled the dough too thinly but didn't bother to redo it. Instead, she grabbed the little man-shaped cutter and attacked the dough, flipping ginger men onto a cookie sheet.

"You've been acting weird ever since I brought up Christmas. If you're freaked about committing, that's cool. We don't have to be official. You don't have to meet my mother. But if you want to be with me, you have to stop with

the lying and evading. If you want to break up, *fine*. But at least be man enough to admit it. None of this bullshit hiding behind having to go out of town suddenly, out of the blue and for no reason." Sasha balled up the dough fragments and started rolling the scraps out, forcing herself to stop talking.

"You done? Can I explain now?"

"You don't have to. I get it, okay?" She whacked the cookie cutter onto the dough. She'd fallen for the flashes of bad boy, but had she only seen them because she wanted them to be there so much? Jay couldn't even be a jerk long enough to break up with her properly. "We both know you're too good for me."

"*What?*" Jay made a strangled noise that could have been a laugh. "That's what you think this is about?"

"You're the nice one, the considerate one. And that's great and all, but if you think I don't get sick of being the big bad wolf in every argument, you can think again. There are times when I kind of hate dating Saint Jay, Prince Among Men--"

"Sasha, baby, that's really cute in an extremely delusional way, but would you please shut the fuck up and let me talk?"

She turned away and shoved the full cookie sheet into the oven. Slamming it shut, she spun to face Jay and folded her arms across her stomach, pressing her back to the oven door. "Fine. You talk."

"First, you need to understand that I want nothing more

than to be able to stay here. I haven't been a hundred percent honest about some things, but you can trust that I want to be here, with you, more than anything."

That didn't sound like a break-up speech. More like an *I have three weeks to live* speech. Had she been imagining the pre-break-up vibes? Anger retreated in the face of nervous concern.

"I have to go. It's not because I want to, but I *can't* stay. I only had permission to be here temporarily--"

"Like a green card?" Jay didn't have an accent, but he did have kind of an odd way of speaking sometimes, like he'd been brought up using English differently. Deportation was definitely preferable to some scary terminal disease. Unless their relationship had been a ploy to stay in the country.

Jay winced. "You could call it that--"

"So you're using me for citizenship?" And just like that, anger was back in command again. "Is this like a proposal? 'Cuz if it is, you suck at it."

"No. Sasha, can you just listen? This is hard enough without the interruptions."

She pressed her lips together, pinning back the questions she was itching to ask. For once he didn't smile or tease her about the effort she had to exert not to interrupt him. Jay took a deep breath and Sasha wrapped her arms more tightly around herself. She had a feeling she wasn't going to like what was coming next.

"When I said I didn't have any family *in this world*, that

wasn't a lie. Not really. But it wasn't the whole truth either. I didn't set out to lie to you. When we met, I thought you knew...that you could tell, I mean, some people can pick us out--"

Was she supposed to be able to spot illegal immigrants? He could pass for Latino, but she'd never heard him speak Spanish and citizenship wasn't exactly tattooed on people's foreheads.

"My father died before I was born and I came to L.A. to find out more about him, to see if I had family here on his side. I didn't lie about that. But my mother--"

A sound like timber splitting cracked through the kitchen.

Sasha yelped in surprise at the fractured noise. Her hands flew up to shield her face as a seam ripped open in the fabric of space directly behind Jay, spilling blinding streams of hellfire and expelling a noxious wave of brimstone and sulfur.

Sasha had worked on movies where they recreated Hell vortexes with special effects, but the reality burned away those pale replicas. The air in the room was instantly so hot it hurt her throat to breathe. Hellfire seared her retinas, but somehow she could still see every detail of Jay's face--his dark eyes flaring wide, his mouth forming her name though all sound seemed to have been vacuumed out of the room.

His body jerked back, flying toward the vortex as the portal snapped closed around him, sucked right out of his shoes and straight to Hell.





## Chapter Three

### How to Cope When Your Boyfriend is Abducted by the Prince of Darkness

Sasha stood in the middle of her kitchen, gaping at the empty air. She could actually feel herself going into shock.

The mixed scents of gingerbread and brimstone lingered in the apartment as Sasha stared at the dingy grey Adidas cross-trainers where her boyfriend used to be. An ashy taste lingered on her tongue. Bing crooned about a white Christmas from the stereo in the living room as the last of the residual puffs of sulfur from the Hell vortex evaporated.

Her only semi-rational thought was to wonder if this meant she'd won the argument.

Disappearance into another plane midsentence really ought to be grounds for forfeiture, but it wasn't a very satisfying win. Wasn't it just like Jay, to vanish into Hell before she could tell him to go there?

Through a mental haze, she realized she ought to be screaming his name and clawing at the air where the Hell gate had been. In her defense, it wasn't every day a girl's fella was yanked into the Underworld just when she was starting to win an argument. Wailing and gnashing of teeth was undoubtedly called for in these situations, but Sasha just stared dumbly as her brain cells jibbered incoherently to one another.

She hated those shoes.

From time to time, she'd fantasized about burning them while Jay slept. Wasn't it just her luck that the one thing left behind would be those smelly old sneakers?

Clearly she needed help, but who were you supposed to call when your boyfriend was kidnapped by demons?

*Ghostbusters?* Hysteria bubbled up inside her, spilling out of her mouth in a laugh she couldn't stop.

"Interesting. You're taking this much better than I anticipated."

Sasha spun toward the voice, her laughter cutting off abruptly. The last rays of the setting sun had disappeared and shadows filled her living room. A hulking silhouette stood just outside the light spilling from the kitchen.

The muted *shrring* of the carving knife sliding free of its block whistled in her ears before she registered the conscious decision to reach for the knife. She took a defensive stance, waving the cleaver warningly.

"Who are you? What do you want? What did you do with Jay?"

The figure shifted and hunched, like a large man trying to fit through a small doorway, before straightening into the light. His overcoat fell away. With a rustling snap, a pair of wings filled the narrow space between her cabinets.

"Holy shit." *There's an angel in my kitchen.* Sasha's breath caught and the knife slipped from her fingers, clattering to the floor.

Even jaded as she was, being in the company of an

actual angel was *majestic*. She trembled, suddenly understanding why the words *awe* and *awful* were related.

His wings were crisp, shining white but scarlet-veined, the tips a gleaming, darker red, as if they'd been recently dipped in blood. He stepped farther into the room, snapping them wider. When they shuddered and stretched, the red markings on the primaries became more noticeable, a blood-red spiderweb draped over the downy perfection of the feathers.

The radiance of his presence would have filled the space, even without the pageantry of the blood-marked wings.

Sasha had heard angels were tall and seen them towering over the common man in television reels, yet his height still startled her. He must have several inches on Jay's six-three, but while Jay was Vin Diesel bulky, the angel's physique was sleek. Muscular, with a trim, aerodynamic elegance.

His hair seemed to change color in shifting light, even though the light wasn't shifting. Platinum blond, silver-tipped white, white tinged with red, and back to blond again. He stood statue still, even his bright blue eyes unmoving.

A silver breastplate, dented by use, molded to his chest and matching wrist bands circled his forearms. An elaborate contraption of a sword belt hung from his hips, complete with a massive sword that could have fallen right out of a sixteenth-century headsman's hands, but otherwise his clothing was disturbingly human--jeans, snug black T-

shirt and black cowboy boots.

Sasha blinked. *An angel in cowboy boots?*

"I am Zacharael, the remembrance of Him," he said in a ringing voice made powerful by its lack of emotion. "I did nothing to your Jay. I am come to deliver you unto your quest."

Sasha mentally scrolled through the familiar names of the angelic pantheon, trying to place Zacharael. He had the look of a warrior--the gigantic sword was kind of a giveaway--but lots of angels played soldier without being of the official warrior caste. He wasn't an Arch, she knew that much, but "the remembrance of Him" didn't give her much to go on. The Angel of Forgetfulness?

"You have been chosen to represent Goodness and Virtue," Zacharael continued mechanically.

"Whoa, rewind a second." Sasha held up her hands in the universal symbol for hold-the-fuck-on. "I didn't sign up for any quest. You've got the wrong girl."

"You were chosen," he repeated. "No other can replace you. If you refuse the commission, he remains below."

"He--you mean Jay? If I refuse you, Jay stays in Hell? No. Bring him back from wherever you sent him and go find someone else's life to fuck with." Sasha took an aggressive step toward the angel before she remembered the exact level of stupidity involved in threatening an immortal warrior.

"It was not I who took him and only you can guide him back."

"Guide him...Don't you guys ever just speak plainly?"

"If you wish to spare him eternal damnation, you must venture into the Underworld and guide him out before the sun rises."

*That was pretty plain.* "You want me to go into Hell? *The Hell?* Are you insane?" She was a stunt double, not a commando.

"You are the Champion of Virtue, representing the angels in a quest of redemption."

Sasha couldn't hold in her disbelieving snort. "I hate to break it to you, buddy, but I'm not exactly the virtuous type."

The angel in her kitchen had been staring fixedly at the wall behind her head, but now his gaze shifted to lock on her. Sasha managed not to squirm under the impact. It occurred to her, rather belatedly, that a smart girl wouldn't argue with divine entities, or call them *buddy*. *Thou shalt not mouth off to angels* was sort of an unwritten commandment--but she could always blame the shock. Demonic abduction had to count as an extenuating circumstance.

It was freeing, in a way, giving herself permission to misbehave. She knew she was supposed to just salute and fall in line, but Sasha had never been very good at taking orders. Especially orders for insane suicide missions.

"Look, I'm sorry, but I'm no one's idea of an angelic champion. Trust me. My name has been on Santa's naughty list since birth. You've got the wrong girl."

For a long, stretching second, the angel just stared at her. Then something softened around the glacial blue of

Zacharael's gaze, making him look almost paternal. "You are being given a rare opportunity, Sasha Christian," he said, a gentleness entering his tone. "An opportunity to have a life with the one you love. But the price must be paid. From sunset to sunrise tonight, you *are* the Champion of Virtue, whether you wish to be or not. If you succeed in fighting back the cloak of darkness and guiding your lover from the depths of Hell, you will never be called upon by angels again."

"Why am I being called on now? Why me? Why *Jay*? What do you want with us?"

"You have until dawn."

Blinding angelic light split the breastplate, bursting out from Zacharael's chest. Sasha shied back, shielding her eyes. "Zacharael!" she shouted, but when the spots cleared from her vision, he was gone. In his place, steeped on the counter, were a pair of silver-plated .44 Magnum Desert Eagle handguns and a thick embossed envelope, the kind only used for wedding invitations and charity dinners.

Anger rushed in to fill the hollow void shock had carved out in her chest. "Goddamn holier-than-thou sons of bitches," she snarled, wishing she had a convenient angelic target to test out the aim of the Desert Eagles.

She palmed one of the guns--just in case anyone else decided to open up a portal in her kitchen. The grip warmed to her touch, seeming to mold itself into her palm. She checked the clip and found it fully loaded, but the heft was off. She'd worked with Desert Eagles before--they

were the most common guns on film sets so she'd fired more than her fair share--but this one felt somehow both lighter and more substantial. Maneuverable, if a gun could be such a thing, and natural, like it was an extension of her arm.

Ignoring the tingling inching toward her elbow, Sasha broke the wax seal on the envelope one-handed.

*Mme. Sasha Raquel Christian, you are cordially invited to enter the domain of His Highness, the Prince of Darkness, Morning Star and ruler of the Multitudes of Hell. Please present this card to the Gatekeeper for admittance to the Underworld at The Catacombs, Our Lady of the Angels Cathedral, 555 W. Temple Street, Los Angeles, California.*

Well. Wasn't that polite?

The script glittered gold on the creamy parchment, disturbingly beautiful for an invitation into the pits of damnation.

Sasha didn't fool herself that her entire trip would be so civil. *Hell*. She was actually going to Hell.

The scent of burnt gingerbread broke into the surreal haze surrounding her brain. "Shit." She'd forgotten to set the damn timer.

Sasha turned off the oven, grabbed a hot pad and yanked the charred gingerbread cinders out of the oven. The leg of one little man was actually on fire. Sasha stared at the ginger man, her stomach rolling over.

## *Jay is in Hell.*

The reality of what she had to do slammed into her.

She had a boyfriend to rescue. At least, she thought she had a boyfriend to rescue. She wasn't entirely sure they weren't broken up. Either way, she was getting Jay the hell out of Hell.

But first, she had an armory to visit. The U.S. government didn't have access to half the weapons a Hollywood stuntman used. Hell wouldn't know what hit it.





## Chapter Four

### Waking the Dead

Sasha shouldered through the crowds, smiling apologetically as she shoved her way toward the Cathedral doors. A knee-length jacket of brick-red leather protected against the light chill in the air--and helped her avoid shocking the parishioners with a stray glimpse of the hardware strapped to her body.

The average devotee probably wouldn't appreciate her crashing mass, armed to the teeth.

The Desert Eagles had appeared complete with an Old-West-style holster which now slung low across her hips. She'd belted extra ammo clips around her waist along with a collection of throwing knives. More throwing knives filled her wrist sheathes, her favorite Walther automatics nestled in her shoulder holster and a modified katana pressed against her spine. Once you factored in the extendable blade tucked in her left boot and the Taser tucked into the inner pocket of her jacket, she was ready for whatever Hell threw at her.

She hoped.

The arsenal wasn't quite the comfort she'd wished it would be. It was difficult to feel confident about victory when she didn't know who--or what--she would be fighting. So little was known about Hell and its denizens. It wasn't as if humans were invited to visit the demon realms on a regular

basis. She'd heard of people questing into Hell, but the stories always had the air of myth or urban legend about them--more likely to be splashed on the front of a tabloid next to a story about alien abduction than the subject of gritty investigative journalism.

Angelic quests made a popular action-movie motif, but so did CIA double agents--and she wasn't being recruited by her government.

*Your mission, should you choose to accept it...* But angels didn't give you a choice. A commission from the angelic host wasn't something a girl could turn down--even if it wouldn't have damned her boyfriend to an eternity in Hell.

Why her? Sasha couldn't get past that question. What did the angels see in her that was so damn virtuous? Not that the winged bastards were as pure and holy as they liked to paint themselves.

Angels had their pretty, public face--the blindingly beautiful Archangels making appearances at Christmas Eve masses around the world--but it didn't take a *Paradise Lost* scholar to know there was more to the angelic army than a few hosannas. They had a bloody history. A history shrouded in contradictions and questions.

And demons were no better. They were even more secretive than the angels in their own way. The demons didn't have Arches acting as poster children. Sasha had always been inclined to think they'd just gotten the short end of the stick, PR-wise, in the Middle Ages, but they'd done

nothing to correct their unwholesome public image since.

She knew they could use demonic glamour to warp perceptions of reality. The popular belief was there were limitations about where and on whom the glamour could be used, but beyond that her knowledge of Hell was limited to Hollywood depictions--and she knew better than most exactly how much of that was complete bullshit.

Knowledge was a tactical advantage--and in this case she had virtually none.

Her game plan was woefully underdeveloped. Go in, find Jay, drag his sorry ass out of Hell, somehow managing to keep them both alive and whole on the way out. She didn't think Jay would be much help there.

He'd come to L.A. for a career development course in finance and business management. Somehow Sasha doubted her desk jockey boyfriend would be much of a warrior. He'd certainly never shown signs of a killer instinct in the six months she'd known him. It had been one of the most annoying things about him, that she could never get him to fight.

Fight for her, fight against her, any flicker of a mercenary spirit would have been comforting to see. But she'd resigned herself to the fact that he wasn't a fighter and decided to love him anyway. She wasn't the kind of girl to try to turn the man she loved into the man she wanted him to be. Instead, she just obsessed over whether they were really right for each other. He seemed to like her combativeness, but was that enough?

A heavyset man jostled her and Sasha twisted to avoid bumping into him pistol-first, reminded of the task at hand. She didn't have time now to wallow in pointless relationship angst. Action first, agonize later. If she couldn't get Jay out of Hell, none of her doubts would matter anyway.

Above her, light poured out of the windows behind the alabaster cross and cast a soft glow over the courtyard. Sasha moved close to the side of the building where the crowds seemed thinner, slipping between the wall and the palm trees lining it. She'd never felt the urge to stand in line for four hours just for the privilege of hearing someone with wings tell the story of the Nativity, but there were angel and Archangel masses in every church large enough to attract them tonight.

Maybe that was why there were no angels available to keep innocent mortals from being abducted by demons. They were all too busy being fawned over by adoring congregations.

The bronze doors swung open and the distant strains of "Silent Night" filtered out over the courtyard. A cheer rippled through the mob as it surged forward, rushing the doors like Black Friday shoppers.

Sasha didn't know how to get to the catacombs beneath the cathedral, but getting inside was a good first step. She flung herself into the crowd, elbows out as a buffer, and rode the tide of people into the cathedral.

The skyscraper ceilings and creamy pale stone walls made the sanctuary seem echoingly peaceful, in spite of

the carnival excitement of the crowd as they scurried up the aisles.

Sasha detached herself from the throng rushing toward the pews and scanned the sanctuary, looking for signs of stairs. She needed to find a way down to the crypts before the ushers realized she'd broken away from the herd. She hardly expected a large flashy sign pointing toward the entrance to Hell—it might ruin the happy Christmas buzz of the holiday faithful—but there had to be stairs somewhere.

Sasha moved toward the altar along the edge of the sanctuary, scanning the nooks and alcoves for stairs. Worshippers poured eagerly into the pews as the organist segued into "Away in a Manger." The atmosphere was an odd combination of festive and reverent—the religious equivalent of a boy band concert. The pious bounced in their chairs, whispering excitedly to one another and pointing toward the nave.

Curious to see which Arch had inspired such levels of giddy adoration, Sasha stepped out from behind a pillar and looked toward the altar. Jaded though she was, and in spite of her recent less-than-ideal encounter with an angel, Sasha's breath caught in her throat at the sight of him. Even in the muted light from the candles, he seemed to glow. Or maybe he really was glowing. Sasha had heard of angel light, but cameras could never capture it so she'd always just thought it was a product of the overactive imaginations of angelophiles.

He stood with his back to the congregation, wings

partially spread. They seemed white at first, but the longer she looked, the more colors she saw sparkling inside the white. Her memory called up an old physics lesson a lighting tech had given her backstage when her mother was going through her Broadway phase. Sitting on the catwalks with their feet dangling down over the stage three stories below, he'd shown her how to slide colored gels in front of the lights to cast pools of richly saturated color onto the actors, mixing them together until the combination of all the colored lights created white light. "Light controls the show, Sasha-girl," he'd bragged, showing her how the different lights could change the colors of the costumes, make the actors appear sickly or tan and make the theatre feel hushed or noisy without a sound.

Then her mother had stepped onto stage and the techie had sighed. "Now angels are different, Sasha-girl." He'd laughed softly, gazing down at her mother with the same hopeless adoration she'd grown up seeing on every face. "Angels are *made* of light."

The angel in her kitchen hadn't been terribly light, but the Arch was a different story. White feathers were supposed to be the absence of pigment, but instead his wings were like white light--the combination of all colors. Shining even in the dim, reverential candlelight.

No wonder the sight of a single angel was rumored to have brought mankind out of the Dark Ages and into the Renaissance. The heavenly host were magnificent, even when all she could see were partially furled wings, blond

curls more commonly seen on cherubs and a slice of his back.

That blond head tipped to the side, as if he was listening to a voice only he could hear--and for all she knew, he was. The angels always implied God spoke to them, never giving any details on the whens and hows. The white-light wings flared then folded more tightly to his body. He turned, deliberate and unhurried--*I'm ready for my close up, Mr. DeMille*--and just as his profile came into view, a ray of light bounced off the pipe organ and illuminated his angelic face. A sigh traveled through the audience.

Uriel. The Archangel of Transformation and yearly contender for *People* magazine's Sexiest Angel title, capable of simultaneously inspiring religious awe and screaming fangirl crushes.

And he was looking straight at her.

Sasha swallowed, incapable of breaking eye contact even from thirty yards away. His features were boyish, but those eyes. She had a sudden sympathy for the ants on a sidewalk. Uriel's depthless silver stare made her feel small and insignificant, a microscopic fleck on the span of history in which *he* was a warrior prince, commanding empires and tipping the scales in great battles. He was Apollo, riding a golden chariot through the sky and she was nothing compared to the scope of his existence.

Then his lips quirked up on one side and Uriel, Angel of Presence, fourth of God's seven lieutenants, *winked* at her.



Sasha went preternaturally still.

He knew. About Jay's abduction, her quest, the portable arsenal she had strapped to her body beneath the worn red leather of her jacket, all of it.

Irritation rushed through her, breaking her awed trance. Of course he knew. He was an angel. The bastard probably had a hand in selecting her as the angelic whipping girl of the night.

The entire heavenly host were on her shit list at the moment, but Sasha didn't think storming up to the altar and cursing out Uriel would be terribly effective. She had a mission and no time to waste on holier-than-thou assholes.

Uriel's smile turned biting, as if he could hear her thoughts. Oh, Sweet Baby Jesus, she hoped he couldn't hear her thoughts. His wings snapped open like a weapon being drawn and the congregation gasped in appreciation. It would have been even more awe-inspiring if his wingspan hadn't been crooked.

It seemed so unangelic to be anything but perfect, Sasha was surprised he would unfurl his wings completely if they were lopsided. Then she realized it wasn't a deformity in the wing, but the way he was holding it. He'd twisted one wing to angle downward.

Pointing awkwardly toward a sign for the mausoleum at the back of the church and a staircase heading down. *The crypts.*

Trust an angel to make giving directions into a spectacle.

Sasha nodded her thanks--hoping she didn't look half as bitterly ungrateful as she felt--and cut across the sanctuary to the stairs.

The mausoleum didn't look like the spooky crypt she'd envisioned. A pair of guardian angel etchings flanked the doors. Even with no light coming through the stained-glass windows, it was bright, airy and spacious, with the same clean geometric lines as the rest of the cathedral. It didn't feel like a tomb. And there was no sign of Hell's gatekeeper.

Sasha pulled the invitation from her pocket and reread it. *The catacombs*. Not the mausoleum. Could there be another crypt beneath this one? There were no stairs here. Studying the parchment, she noticed a watermark of the numbers 140 like a mirage beneath the script. She angled it for a better look, making out the shape of a falcon, holding a key in its talons and with the name John in a banner across its breast.

Great. John. Because there was bound to be only one *John* buried here.

She wandered along the corridor and scanned the names listed on the crypts, pausing for a moment when she saw Gregory Peck's final resting place. The burial couches were numbered, but the numbering skipped from 135 to 141. Frustrated, Sasha tracked back toward the front of the mausoleum and stepped into a nearby alcove, searching for the missing couches. She yanked on the double doors leading off the alcove, but they were locked tight. Then the

stained-glass window caught her eye. At its center was a crest with a winged lion standing on a banner with the name St. Mark scrolled on it.

*Not a dead guy named John. Saint John.*

Sasha moved quickly through the side chapels, searching for the bird with the key and hoping Uriel hadn't pointed her in the wrong direction just to be an ornery prick.

She almost missed the St. John alcove. Shooting off another hidden nook, it wasn't visible from the main corridor. The stained glass was a perfect replica of the watermark, but when she looked at the invitation to confirm, the picture had changed, now reading Geryon.

Sasha tested the two sets of double doors leading off the alcove. The first didn't budge, but the second swung open easily, revealing a small private crypt. To the right of the door, three burial couches were stacked on top of one another in the wall and an etching on the stone identified it as plot 140. Only the middle couch appeared to be occupied, the inscription reading Geryon Smith, but the dates for birth and death couldn't be right. They were exactly one hundred years apart—but the date of death wouldn't occur for another ten years.

Sasha didn't want to touch the tomb. She'd just as soon leave the pillaging of gravesites to Indiana Jones, but if this was the only way to get to Jay...

She reached out and tentatively tapped the engraved name. Nothing happened. Sasha licked her lips nervously. "I sure hope you're not decomposing in there, Geryon," she

muttered before giving the tomb a shove.

It didn't creak and groan and reveal a hidden staircase like action movies had conditioned her to expect. The wall just *vanished*, taking the entire room with it.



## Chapter Five

### The Blurry Lines Between Heaven, Hell & Hollywood

Sasha wasn't in a crisp, gleaming white crypt anymore.

"What the he--" She stopped herself before referencing Hell, uncertain what the protocol was for swearing in the Underworld. "Hello?" Her voice echoed as if she were on a cavernous sound stage, but the dim, torch-lit room she was in was small, barely bigger than Saint John's alcove. Sasha spun three hundred and sixty degrees, trying to get her bearings.

There were no doors, no windows, just a seamless drywall box, but somehow she had been transported here without moving an inch. In theory, that meant she could get out again. Unless the entire quest was a trap. But why would the angels go to such trouble to trap her here? It didn't make sense. This had to be the entrance.

Or some kind of waiting room. The only furnishings were a high-backed chair, a freestanding lamp and a coffee table stocked with back issues of *Us Weekly* and *Hello!* magazine.

"Great. The waiting room of Hell. So where's the damn receptionist?"

A high, chattering giggle echoed behind her.

Sasha whipped around, her hand going to the Desert Eagle on her right hip.

A little man crouched in the shadows.

"You weren't there a second ago."

He cocked his head to the side. "Wasn't I?" He giggled again, the sound skittering around the room like a bird fluttering off the walls.

"Geryon?"

"Please, call me Gerry." He stepped into the light from the lamp and Sasha realized what she'd thought was a crouch was his natural height. He couldn't be more than four-feet tall, but his shoulders were those of a much larger man, broad and heavy. He wore snug black leather pants and a flowing pirate shirt hung open midway down his chest. He had a thin, greased moustache--the kind that hadn't been popular since the twenties--and when he smiled his face was eerily familiar, though Sasha was sure she had never seen him before. She would have remembered the horns. Not to mention the solid red complexion.

Nubby horns the size of a thimble ringed his head like a crown, poking out of his oil-slicked black hair, and his skin was the ruddy color of red clay.

He looked classically demonic, but she'd envisioned the gatekeeper as bigger, more imposing. Maybe breathing fire or with razor-sharp teeth. Not as a chattering Oompa-Loompa with a pirate fetish.

"You're the gatekeeper?"

"Mmm," Gerry mumbled vaguely as he circled her, peering up into her face. "So you're the one dating Satan's stepson, eh? I thought you'd be taller."

"Sorry, you've got me mixed up with someone else," Sasha said, beginning to feel like that was all she ever said. "I don't know Satan or his stepson." She flashed the invitation. "An angel sent me. I need to get into Hell."

And with those words she officially surpassed her daily quota of things she'd expected never to say.

Gerry beamed at her and scuttled back to perch on a stool she would *swear* hadn't been there a minute ago. He crossed his legs and laced his fingers over one knee. "Complicated business, angelic quests. They never tell you everything you think they're telling you."

"I hear you on that one. They didn't tell me shit."

Gerry giggled, and again the sound seemed to travel around the room without him. "I like you, Christian. You're funny. I can see why he chose you."

"I wasn't aware a sense of humor was a criterion for being picked on by angels." And she certainly hadn't been trying to be funny. She waved the invitation again. "You're the gatekeeper, right? I give you this and you let me in?"

"Well--" Gerry swung his top leg, rocking on the stool, "--there is the small matter of the toll."

"Of course." There was always a price. "And the toll is...?"

"That's a nice jacket."

"I don't really think it's your color," Sasha retorted, already emptying the pockets of artillery and stripping the brick-red leather from her shoulders. She flung it at him and he caught it deftly, plucking at the seams with sharp little



nails and humming happily.

"Lovely workmanship. Thank you, Christian. I shall treasure it always." He swung the jacket around his shoulders like a cape, the hem brushing the floor. "Now about your toll."

She wedged her Taser into her front jeans pocket, adjusting it so it didn't bump the angelic .44 Magnum on her hip. "The jacket is my toll."

"Is it? Did I agree to that?" Gerry's giggle roamed the room again. "Christian, Christian. You will never make it in Hell if that is how you make deals with devils. Giving me gifts before we agree to a price? You give me all the power in the negotiation." He shook his head dolefully. "I like you, but the next demon may not be so generous."

So generous as to steal her favorite jacket. *Damned Oompa-Loompa*. "How does one make deals with devils?"

"Very carefully." He smiled viciously. "Angels, humans, you're so direct. A demon never comes at a deal head-on. You cannot reveal what you really want. Exposing your desire makes you weak and dealing with demons is all about strength, getting everything while giving nothing. You give a compliment, offer something you have no intention of giving until your opponent reveals what they truly desire. Then you have the power, see? Angels have rules and brute force. *We* have strategy and finesse."

There was pride in his voice and Sasha was struck by the realization that she was talking to a real, live demon. It was a symptom of how insane her night had been that it

had taken her this long before that whammy hit. She had never even seen a demon on television before. They were hermitlike with their privacy. And now, here she was, getting a crash course on demon negotiations from a devil himself.

A thousand questions leapt into her mind--*Are demons really evil? Why would they bother tempting man? Do they feel happiness? Joy? Love?*--but she didn't have time to interrogate Gerry. Jay had been in Hell for nearly two hours already. She had no idea what was happening to him and the longer she delayed, the more a gnawing sense of worry ate away at her insides.

She needed to negotiate her entrance into the Underworld. Quickly.

*Give a compliment...* "That's a nice moustache."

Gerry preened, stroking the greasy curl on his upper lip. "You like it? My glamour was locked when I was imprisoned here, so I can't change it, but I think it suits me. Don't you?"

"Definitely. It's you."

"Douglas Fairbanks had one just like it, you know."

With those words, Sasha abruptly realized who Gerry reminded her of. The twenties moustache, the swashbuckling clothes, even his facial features were similar, with the exception of the horns. Geryon was Douglas Fairbanks as an Oompa-Loompa demon. She'd heard a demon's ability to change his appearance varied, but it never occurred to her that a small, horned man with red skin would try to make himself over into a long-dead silent-movie star.

"You a big Fairbanks fan?"

"He was the first." Gerry sighed, radiating hero worship from every ruddy pore. "The first of the Hollywood royalty. His charisma could captivate an audience." His expression turned sly. "There's power in that, you know. No one could hold a viewer in the palm of his hand quite like Fairbanks." Gerry hopped down from the stool and wandered over to the wall, pulling down a framed black-and-white photo that hadn't been hanging there a moment ago. "Morning Star was jealous, of course. In retrospect it might not have been wise for me to tell Lucifer to his face that Douglas Fairbanks was more charismatic than he, but a hundred years guarding this gate is a small punishment. Though the time does seem to stretch these days. I don't get many visitors. Are you sure you won't stay?"

"I really should be getting on." She had no way of knowing how long it would take her to find Jay and bring him out. Visions of torture danced in her head--this Christmas Eve wasn't exactly Sugar Plum Fairy material.

"I don't have to let you pass," Gerry said with a cagey smile.

Sasha's eyes flicked down to the celebrity rags littering the table--this week's issues by the look of them. Gerry might not get out much, but he had the most up-to-date celebrity gossip at his fingertips. "That's a shame," Sasha said carefully. "If you don't let me through, I don't think I can tell you the inside scoop on Trista Lovelace's new boyfriend."

She tossed out the name of Hollywood's newest darling casually, but Gerry's breathing quickened and his pupils dilated until his eyes were pools of black—a junkie scenting his next fix. "Trista Lovelace?"

"I might be willing to tell you," Sasha said carefully, "if that information paid my toll and got me into Hell without any further delay." She tried to make the sentence pin down any variables, leaving as little up to interpretation as possible.

Gerry beamed. "She learns!" He laughed, bounding up onto his stool again, the framed photo vanishing from his hands. "Tell me."

"Agree to the deal first."

He rocked back and forth on the stool, humming gleefully. "Smart, Christian, not to trust me." His eyes twinkled like a demented Santa Claus as he confessed, "I *lie*, you know. It's what we do."

The feeling she was completely out of her depth returned. Marching into Hell and making deals with demons wasn't how she'd envisioned her Christmas Eve. Fantasies of decorating cookies and watching *It's a Wonderful Life*, all down the drain so she could negotiate with creatures who took pleasure in deception.

"Do we have a deal?"

"So stern, so forceful." Gerry snickered. "A deal. You tell me about Trista Lovelace's love life and I open the portal of Hell for you."

"Do we shake on it?"

"Never give a demon lord your hand, Christian. You might not get it back."

Sasha put her hand back on the butt of the Desert Eagle. "Fair enough." Thank God she'd just finished doubling for Trista on next summer's blockbuster. "Trista Lovelace broke up with Cameron Kyle and is now dating his younger brother, Duncan. Open the portal."

Gerry's head wobbled in a circle as he giggled, the Cheshire Cat on helium. "Duncan Kyle! That is almost worth two boons."

"The portal."

"Yes, of course." He spun to face the blank wall behind him, rubbing his palms together. "But where should I put it? Here? Close to your imprisoned lover? Or perhaps there, in the outer Mongolia of the demonic realms? Decisions, decisions."

Frustration tightened Sasha's grip on the angel's gun. "Put it close. You can count that as my second boon. You said yourself my gossip was worth two."

He held up a finger. "*Almost* two. But I can put you right in your lover's lap, *if--*"

"If?"

"Layla Christian. So beautiful, so charismatic, and yet so elusive. She smiles and even the press forget to mourn the loss of the stories she could give them. And *you* know all her secrets." Gerry's expression was no longer that of a playful fanatic. Now his eyes were hungry and dark. "Tell me just one secret, Layla Christian's daughter. One thing no

one else knows."

The Desert Eagle seemed to leap out of the holster, eager to come out and play. "My mother taught me how to fire a gun," Sasha said, leveling the .44 Magnum at the impish demon. "How's that for a secret?"

Gerry gasped, his expression alight. "Oh yes, I can see why he likes you. An Amazon with an angel's sword." He grinned again--an expression Sasha was coming to realize was more feral than joyful. "You may yet succeed tonight, Christian. But are you sure you want to? Angelic promises never mean what you want them to. What prize did they offer you?"

"This isn't about a prize." She wasn't a mercenary, for Chrissake. "I'm getting Jay out of Hell."

Gerry shrank down on himself, his giddy humor darkening rapidly. "Be careful what you wish for, Sasha Christian. In Heaven, as in Hell, things are rarely as they seem. The pawn of virtue enamored of Morning Star's stepson is not beloved of angels. Light cannot love the dark."

What the hell was his deal with the Satan's stepson bit? Was that some kind of demonic trash talk? "Thank you, Yoda. The portal?"

This time Gerry's smile was disturbingly demonic. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

He turned and placed his hand against the plain white drywall. It shriveled away from his touch like tissue burning, peeling back the walls and ceilings and eating across the

floor until the waiting room was reduced to ashy cinders on a rough stone floor.

*Now this is a catacomb. Indiana Jones, eat your heart out.*

Torches lit a massive cavern with wavering light, drawing shadows on pocked stone and sod walls. Sasha avoided looking at those walls too closely--not wanting to know what else they might be composed of.

Uneven stairs led up to a stone altar in the center of the cavern, an altar dominated by an engraved metal door standing alone at the center of the dais. A door she knew didn't just open to the empty air on the other side.

Gerry scurried up the stairs, pulled a key from his voluminous pirate sleeves and fit it into the lock. The door swung open without a whisper of sound--no pomp, no fanfare, no deathly screams. Gerry bowed like a Victorian butler. "Welcome to Hell, Christian."

Sasha licked her lips nervously. *Quickly, like ripping off a Band-Aid.* She took the steps two at a time and kept that momentum going, rushing the door. *Oh shit, what am I doing?* Two running strides and she was there.

Sasha stormed the door to Hell at a run--and slammed into an invisible barrier, bouncing off it and landing hard on her ass. "*Oomphf.*"

Gerry's cackle danced around the cavernous room. "Did the Champion forget to sign her contract? Silly girl. Can't get into the Prince's lair without signing."

"What contract?" Sasha snapped. "There was no contract."

"Wasn't there? What's that in your pocket?"

The embossed invitation to Hell began to rise out of her back pocket of its own volition. Sasha caught it one-handed before it could float out of reach. The paper crackled beneath her fingers, heavy cardstock morphed into crinkling velum and a trifolded contract fell open in her hands. Large calligrapher's script filled the pages with brown ink.

"Sign and enter," Gerry taunted from behind the door.

No matter how rushed she was, there was no way Sasha was signing a contract to enter Hell without reading every word. The Desert Eagle still in one hand, she began skimming. The definitions for Champions, Satan and the Dominions of Hell filled the first two pages, but on the third page...

*The signer commits herself to the role of Champion of Virtue until dawn, Christmas morning--blah, blah, blah--at which time, if the Champion has not exited the Dominions of Hell, he/she will remain therein eternally.*

"Whoa. An eternity in Hell?"

Gerry shrugged, examining his nails. "Sign and risk your eternal soul or refuse and seal the fate of another's. Your choice, Christian."

Sasha wasn't a fan of ultimatums unless she was the one issuing them, but the contract reiterated what the angel had said about no replacement Champions. It was her or



no one. Jay may have been about to break up with her, but even commitment-phobe assholes with green card issues didn't deserve to spend the rest of their lives in Hell. It was a little too extreme a punishment.

And she might actually be in love with the idiot. The jury was still out on that one. Though if she saved his ass from Hell and he *still* wouldn't come to Christmas dinner, they were going to have words. And those words may or may not involve her fist connecting with his pretty-boy nose.

"You got a pen?"

Gerry flashed his teeth--his smile looking less friendly by the second. "Not ink, Christian. Blood."

His body evaporated in a puff of smoke, but his laughter continued to ricochet around the cavern.

Sasha holstered the gun and released a throwing knife from her wrist sheath. In the movies, the idiot actors always sliced open their palms or fingertips, but Sasha didn't need fresh blood slicking her grip or an open sore distracting her right now. She shoved up her sleeve and pressed the tip of the blade to the back of her forearm until a drop of blood formed on the tip.

Lifting the knife, the single drop fell. When it splashed onto the contract, a blinding flash of light cracked through the cavern and the paper vanished. Lightning in a catacomb.

*'Cuz that isn't ominous at all.*

Sasha cleaned and resheathed the knife, drew the Desert Eagle and walked toward the door.

This was insane. Absolutely insane. Going to face God-knew-what in the devil's den to save a guy she'd been halfway to breaking up with this afternoon. Maybe she did really love the schmuck. Only love was this nuts.



## Chapter Six

### No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service

Jay groaned and rolled onto his side--less than comforted by the rattling of chains that accompanied the move.

He felt like he'd been hit in the face with a baseball bat. Which wasn't entirely outside the realm of possibility. The last thing he remembered was being yanked into Hell and the whip-crack of his mother's voice.

Coming to in a dark cell, chained ankle and wrist, wasn't exactly a shock.

Jay forced his eyes to focus, taking stock of his surroundings. There wasn't much to see.

A dripping candelabra sat on the floor in front of him, the flickering light not managing to penetrate the shadows more than a few feet. What he could see of the cell was the kind of classic Tudor-era torture chamber his mother preferred, but the lady herself was nowhere in sight. He didn't think she would actually torture him. He was too valuable. It doubtless simply hadn't occurred to her to put him anywhere else.

His jeans were ragged and dirt-crusting at the knee, as if his legs had been dragged along the ground to the cell. No shirt, no shoes, and what felt like dried blood caked in his hair. He reached up a hand to his forehead and found at least he wasn't actively bleeding.

A door creaked open in the darkness. "Awake already?"

Damn, you heal quickly." Verin's face swam out of the shadows. "You've been a bad boy, cousin."

Jay groaned, propping his shoulders against the wall so he wasn't lying prostrate at her feet. "And here I was trying so hard to be good."

"Is that what you call it?" She crouched down in front of him, her sharp, angular features severe and unsmiling. "You should have come back when you were told, Jay. Lucifer doesn't take it well when his summons are ignored."

"The Prince never summoned me."

"A summons from his bride is a summons from the Dark Prince."

"Forgive me if I'm not interested in being a pawn in my mother's political games," he snapped, gathering the chains around him so he could sit up more.

"It's not my forgiveness you should be begging for, buddy. Jezebeth is very angry with you."

"That's nothing new."

Verin smiled. "But some things are new, Jay. The balance of power has shifted."

Because of him. His mother had been Lucifer's mistress for millennia and no one had taken her seriously. The Prince had known she was too ambitious for her own good and kept her in check, but Jezebeth had chafed against his restrictions. Demonic powers were most effective against humans, but Jezebeth had heard rumors that demon-human hybrids could use their abilities against other demons, even within the bounds of Hell itself. Thirty-five years ago, she'd

gone to the mortal plane, found a human with natural immunity to demonic powers and seduced him.

Jay was the result.

She had created him as a weapon. And a lure. Jezebeth had known Lucifer would forgive her infidelity if Jay would fight for him. But no one had suspected she would actually get him to agree to a marriage contract. The balance of power had certainly changed, but it wasn't clear yet how--or for how long it would stay this way.

"I'm not going to stay here and fight for Lucifer, no matter what my mother wants."

Verin laughed. "You say that as if you have a choice." She leaned forward, her eyes alight.

She was enjoying taunting him. Cackling delight filled her thoughts, bouncing around in his brain. He'd forgotten how damn loud that could be, with Hell acting as an amplifier to his abilities.

Verin cocked her head. "Perhaps you have a choice after all. You've certainly made some interesting friends in your time on earth, Jevroth."

"I am charming."

"Did you know the angels sent a girl into Hell after you? And she isn't just a girl, is she, cousin?"

*Sasha.* His heart began to pound. Hell was dangerous even for those who knew it well. He didn't want her anywhere near this place, but still his stupid heart rose at the thought of her coming for him.

Verin scowled. "You should have told me what Sasha

really is. Secrets are bad for the soul."

Jay locked his jaw. He'd learned his lesson about secrets the hard way. He'd lost his chance to tell Sasha the truth himself. Now he had no way of knowing what the angels had told her. Lies, truth, they could be equally damning if she believed them.

By now, they would certainly have told her he was a demon. No more breaking it gently. His mind raced, supplying a thousand possible reactions she might have had.

"Do you know what her quest is?" Verin asked conversationally. "We've been taking bets on it all evening. Does she come to redeem you? Or to kill you for her angelic masters?"

He couldn't believe Sasha would kill him. Leave him to Hell, yes. Seek him out to exterminate him? He didn't think he'd gotten her quite that angry.

"No bets? You aren't being a very good sport about this, Jay. Where's your sense of humor?"

"It must be chained up in a different cell."

Verin laughed. "Don't worry about the chains. I know you want to see your precious Sasha and we're going to make sure she finds you. We have to know if she's going to save us the trouble of killing you."

"My mother won't allow me to be killed." He was too useful.

"No, you're probably right. But Sasha on the other hand...well, she probably won't be killed right away either.

She's valuable to you, isn't she? What would you do to spare her life, do you suppose?"

Something feral rose up in him. "Don't you threaten her," he snarled.

"What did you think would happen, cousin? You ride off into the sunset together and spawn adorable little demon cherubs? I wouldn't get your hopes up. Light and dark can't coexist together. You know the rules." Verin smiled. "And she'll make such a pretty whipping girl."

Jay lunged up, snapping the chains taut, so quickly Verin barely had time to jerk out of his reach. Her back slammed against the far wall of the cell and she stayed there, only her eyes visible in the darkness, her breath coming fast.

"Damn, you're quick." She crept back into the light and he heard the echo of her thoughts growing more arrogant with each step. "Harming me won't do you any good, cousin. I'm not the one holding an ax over Sasha's pretty head."

No. That was his mother. Jay sagged back against the wall, letting the chains fall lax.

"It shouldn't be long now," Verin commented as she faded back into the shadows again. He heard a creaking groan, a heavy wooden door being opened. "Patience," she said, the word sounding like a curse--and from Verin, Demon of Impatience, it could be.

The door rattled on its hinges when it slammed shut, leaving Jay alone with his thoughts. Chained in a holding cell, with only his doubts for company, awaiting Lucifer's judgment on his truancy these last few months. Awaiting the



arrival of the girlfriend his very existence had put in danger.  
Just another sterling Christmas Eve.

\* \* \*

Hell wasn't at all what Sasha had expected. No fire. No brimstone. Just a series of empty beige halls permeated by the indefinable odor of the DMV, not quite masked by the scents of ammonia and lemon Pledge.

She'd imagined Hell as a crowded place, noisy with the screams of those burning in its fires, but the only sound was the constant hum of the air conditioners. She had yet to see a single demon, but an itching between her shoulder blades, the unmistakable sensation of being watched, had plagued her ever since she stepped through Geryon's door.

She'd never felt so uncomfortable in someplace quite so innocuous. The dull corporate hallways had to be an illusion, a veil over the real Hell. What could be more deceptively innocent than unflattering fluorescent lighting?

Sasha navigated the maze of abandoned Hell halls, guided by nothing more than instinct, a gut feeling she was headed toward Jay. She'd always been hyperaware of him, from the first time they met.

She'd been feeding her fiction addiction at the Malibu public library when she felt a tingling wakefulness shiver through her thoughts, like a tuning fork ringing inside her mind. She'd looked up and he'd been standing right in front of her, a question in the bottomless black of his eyes.

Physically he was a god, but the mild-mannered library

dweller had never been her type. He looked like Clark Kent, apologetic and shy, but she'd let herself be talked into grabbing an espresso at the Starbucks down the street, hoping Superman would make an appearance.

He'd talked about digging through old family records, looking for traces of aunts, uncles and cousins he'd never known. He was interesting, occasionally quite funny, but so tentative with her, like he expected her to reject him at any moment. Sasha didn't understand how someone so pretty could be so insecure one second and then brash and confident the next.

He wasn't the type of guy who usually flipped her switches, but she really *liked* him. It was hard not to. So when he asked if he could see her again, she said yes. And then outside the movie theater on their first date, she let him brush a hesitant kiss across her mouth and agreed to go out again.

Jay was a puzzle--capable but guarded--and she was intrigued. So she kept saying yes, because there was never a good reason to say no. She kept hoping the tingles, the humming awareness of him, would translate into wild passion, but even though she couldn't complain in the bedroom department, she'd always been waiting for the fireworks that never came. There were hints of Superman lurking inside, but he never made an appearance, and she'd discovered she rather liked dating Clark Kent.

Until he started wiggling out about meeting her parents. At first she thought he was intimidated by her celebrity

family, but he'd never seemed to care about the fame game before. The more he had evaded, the more she had begun to wonder about the secrets he kept, the distance that was always between them. Dating the alter ego was only fun when she was in on his secret identity.

Jay could play the role of devoted boyfriend beautifully, but when real commitment was involved the character fell away. What she'd thought was their relationship developing was just him playing house. This was why she didn't date actors. They only wanted to perform their connections, not live them.

But Jay was different. Or she'd thought he was. Now she didn't know what to think.

He was just a guy trapped in Hell. A mission to complete.

He couldn't be more to her. Not right now. She couldn't worry about him. She needed to focus.

Sasha stopped beside a beige wall, flooded by the sense Jay was behind it, but there were no doors in either direction for a hundred feet. Holding the Desert Eagle against her thigh, she put her free hand flat against the plaster, then jerked it back when the wall began to move beneath her fingers, rippling across her palm. "Jesus."

A low laugh reverberated at the end of the hallway, accompanied by skittering sounds. Sasha spun toward the noise, taking aim, but only caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of her vision. The hall stretched away from her, empty as far as she could see.

"Note to self--Hell is creepy and you're being watched by invisible hyenas." *Suck it up, Sasha.* She turned back to the wall hiding Jay. "Things aren't always as they seem," she muttered to herself, drawing comfort from the familiarity of her own voice.

She lifted one hand to the wall again, shuddering when it came alive under her fingers. It felt like wet stone--and as soon as she thought the word *stone*, the plaster and drywall flickered like a mirage and vanished, leaving the section of the wall directly in front of her a damp stone-and-mortar construction. This was her access point to Jay.

The stone didn't look very stable, so Sasha gave an experimental shove. Rumbling like an avalanche, the rocks tumbled away--but rather than down, they fell sideways, rippling away from her touch until a portal opened, wide enough for her to step through.

"Jay?" She wrapped both hands around the Desert Eagle.

There was nothing but shadows on the other side of the wall.

And the sound of rattling chains. "Sasha?"

Her breathing snagged at the sound of his voice. "*Jay.*" Sasha forgot about being watched, forgot about the quest, the creepy moving walls and Gerry's ominous warnings. She rushed toward the sound of Jay's voice, not realizing until she heard him speak, heard that he was still *able* to speak, how frightened she had been for him. Relieved tears pricked in her eyes, but she ignored them. *There's no*

*crying in Hell.*

The avalanche reversed, sealing her in darkness, but Sasha didn't look back. She groped forward through the pitch, toward where she thought she'd heard Jay. "Are you all right?"

"Over here," Jay called and Sasha whipped around.

*How could she have gotten so disoriented?* She thought that was where the entrance was, but now her dark-adjusted eyes made out a flicker of candlelight on metal and flesh. *What had they done to him?*

Sasha hurried toward him, knocking her shin hard on something solid, but not even looking down to see what it was. She couldn't take her eyes away from Jay--filthy, bare-chested, nothing-had-ever-looked-better-to-her-in-her-entire-life Jay.

"Oh God, is that blood?"

She fell to her knees at his side, wanting to throw herself into his arms, just to feel his skin against hers and know he was all right, but not wanting to hurt him if there were injuries beneath the dirt and dried blood.

"It's nothing." He cupped her face, searching her eyes for something, then bared his teeth in an unfamiliar, fierce smile, holding up his shackled wrists. "Take the light. See if you can find something to open these."

A bud of unease sprouted in her chest--her Jay was never so commanding. He wasn't the take-charge type. He didn't have that edge. Could Hell have changed him in a matter of hours?

Ignoring the sense of disquiet, she holstered her gun, grabbed a candle and began searching for keys, tools, anything that could be used on his bindings.

Seeing the room for the first time, Sasha shuddered. *Is that an iron maiden?* "What is this place?"

"Whatever its owner needs it to be. Hell isn't static like earth."

How did he know that? Had his captors told him? Sasha found a fireplace poker she somehow doubted had been used only for stoking fires, given the bits of charred *stuff* stuck to the end. She refused to wonder what that stuff was, or who it came from. She held it up.

Jay nodded sharply. "Good girl. That's perfect. Bring it here."

He extended one leg, bracing the shackle at his ankle against a stone and wincing at the change in position.

"Are you hurt? Can you walk?" What had they done to him? And how could she get him out if she couldn't move him? Was that what Gerry had meant with his vague warnings?

"Don't worry," Jay said without looking up, his focus on positioning the shackle to his satisfaction. "Demons heal quickly."

Sasha froze a step away from him, raising the poker defensively. "What did you say?" she whispered.

Jay looked up and she watched the expression drain from his face until it was completely neutral, guarded. "I can explain," he said carefully--and those words were all the

confirmation she needed.

*A demon. I'm dating a demon.*





## Chapter Seven

### So You're Dating a Demon

*Oh shit.* Jay had been so stupidly certain the angels would have told her everything. When she'd rushed to his side and seemed so grateful to see him, he'd assumed she must have forgiven his deception, understood his true feelings for her, and come to redeem him so they could stay together.

The sight of her, his very own avenging angel, gun in hand, hair streaming behind her, had knocked the breath right out of him.

But the angelic bastards hadn't told her shit, and now she was winding up like a major league hitter with that fireplace poker, ready to swing it at his head. He raised a hand, ready to catch the poker if she tried to club him.

"Sasha, baby, listen to me."

Her eyes narrowed and the poker wagged threateningly. "Don't call me baby, demon."

"Sasha, you know me." Jay gathered his feet under him. Could he disarm her without hurting her? Or taking a fireplace poker to the cranium? "I haven't changed. I'm just not one hundred percent human. I thought the angels told you."

"So you only confessed to being a demon because you thought someone else had already told me?"

Jay winced. "I know it looks that way, but I was trying to

tell you--"

"When you were conveniently sucked into a demonic vortex? I have to say, Jay, it would have eased my mind at that point to know you belong in Hell."

"I meant to tell you sooner."

"I'm supposed to believe a demon?" She huffed out an angry breath. "It makes sense, in a way. Demons are known for lying and that's definitely your strong suit, isn't it?"

"I didn't mean to deceive you. At first I thought you knew what I was."

"Do I look like I have some kind of demon radar?"

Jay figured it was best not to answer that question. Apparently his demonic nature wasn't the only secret the angels were still keeping from Sasha. "Can I have the poker? We don't have much time." And he'd really rather have this conversation when she wasn't threatening him with a sharp object.

He barely caught the poker she flung at him before it could smack him in the face.

In the same move, she drew a gleaming silver gun and pointed it straight at his chest. "Better?"

*Out of the frying pan.* The poker would have hurt like the devil, but he could have shaken it off. He could have asked her to shoot the manacles off before--he knew she was a crack shot--but he hadn't wanted that gun pointed anywhere near him.

A bullet from a human gun was unlikely to kill him, but the swirling etched into the barrel meant she was holding an

angel's sword. She could do some serious damage even if she just tried to wing him. Angel swords--whatever form they chose to take--were created to destroy demons.

Did she know that? Did she know if she squeezed the trigger she could end him? Just what mission had the angels assigned her that she needed a Demon Killer?

"Sasha..." he began cautiously, but couldn't find the words to continue. Getting her to trust him again seemed too big a task for a collection of verbs and nouns.

Her expression was fierce. "You said you could explain. Start talking."

It wasn't the threat of the gun that spurred his tongue, so much as the wounded flicker in her eyes. The betrayed ache he was solely responsible for putting there.

"I'm only half demon. My father was human. An anthropologist working at USC. My mother..." There really was no way of painting his mother in a positive light without outright lying and he refused to lie to Sasha any more. "My mother is an ambitious demoness who thought having a hybrid child would enhance her standing in the demonic court." And she hadn't been wrong. "But I never wanted to spend my life as a pawn in an endless string of intrigues. I didn't know what I wanted..."

"You better not say *until you met me*. My bullshit tolerance is low right now, Jay."

At least she was calling him Jay again. It was a definite improvement over the way she'd spat *demon* at him like an epithet. "I went to the mortal realm looking for...I don't know.

Guidance. Answers. Some kind of direction. I thought if I could find my father's family, find where the human half of me came from, I would understand why I never felt complete in Hell."

"I will shoot you if you say 'you complete me.'"

Jay suppressed a smile. The demonic part of his nature was unspeakably turned on by her rage. She had no idea how enthralling she was right now. "I found out my father was an orphan with no known relatives, but by then I already knew I wanted to stay on the mortal plane. Everything was so *alive*. Humans seemed to feel things so much more strongly because their lives were so much shorter they had to pack their experiences in tightly. I couldn't go back to the chess game of the demon realm, where manipulations and intrigues can take a thousand years to develop. Not after I experienced the rush of human existence. I knew I had to find a way to stay...and that's when I met you."

The gun's muzzle lowered a few inches. Sasha's eyes were still wary, but there was a hopeful crack in her angry mask that hadn't been there moments ago.

"I thought you could help me be less demonic. I wanted to be *good*. For you. You made me feel like I was human and normal, sometimes *too* normal for you, but I couldn't tell you the truth and have you look at me like--like you're looking at me now."

"How am I looking at you?" she asked softly.

"Like you'll never trust me again." Jay thought he saw a shadow shift out of the corner of his eye. A soft skittering

sound rustled through the darkness. *Minions*. "And I've run out of time to convince you to."

\* \* \*

He moved quickly--almost faster than she could see--and in a blink his hand was on the gun, shoving the barrel away. She tried to jerk it up and out of his grasp, but her arm tangled in the chain linking his wrists as he locked one arm around her waist. He spun her in his arms so her back was pressed to his front and both of his hands covered hers on the gun, pointing the muzzle toward the ground. Sasha writhed in his hold, struggling against his superior strength. She locked her grip on the gun in case he tried to pry it from her fingers and snapped her head back sharply, but Jay got his chin out of the way in time.

"Sasha." Her boot heel slammed down on his bare instep and he grunted. "*Sasha*. Dammit, I'm not going to hurt you, but we don't have time for this. Look at the shadows, the way they move. Do you see them?"

She went still in his arms, her eyes scanning the shadows. "Them?"

"Minions. Lesser demons, vicious and mindless, easily controlled."

And then she saw them, oddly shaped silhouettes scuttling just out of the light, visible only when they moved--their black eyes blinking in the darkness.

"Damn parasites. My mother will have sent them here to

stop us."

"Why?" *Someone declare that demoness Mother of the Year.* "Why are you chained?"

"My mother recently married, but I refused her summons to come home and do tricks for her new husband. She doesn't take rejection well."

Sasha groaned. "Tell me you aren't actually Satan's stepson."

"He prefers to be called Lucifer. And really he isn't that bad."

*Of course he isn't.* "I'm sure the Prince of Darkness has lots of finer qualities," Sasha said. "But why do the angels care about you? Why would they want me to bring a demon out of Hell by dawn Christmas morning?"

Jay went unnaturally still behind her. "Is that what they want?" His voice sounded odd. Choked.

"What does that mean? Jay?" She tried to twist in his grip, needing to see his face. "You can let me go. I'm not going to shoot you right now." Though she still didn't know if she could trust him. Or if a lying, son-of-a-demon boyfriend was even worth rescuing from the bowels of Hell.

His hold loosened, but he didn't release her entirely until she tucked the Desert Eagle back into its holster. Not that she could blame him. Holding a gun on her significant other wasn't exactly good relationship etiquette.

She turned to face him as he bent to apply the poker to his ankle cuffs like a crowbar. "Is it some kind of angel code? The dawn thing?"

Jay looked up, but didn't quite meet her eyes. "Dawn Christmas morning...could mean a lot of things."

Sasha's jaw locked. "Jay. When I'm pissed off and armed is not the time to be keeping things from me."

His lips twitched. Who was this guy who grinned when she threatened him? He certainly wasn't the Jay she knew. And why did she *like* him this way? He was a demon. She was supposed to revile his very existence. Instead she felt a delicious little thrill that she was finally seeing behind the veil to the other Jay.

"It could mean redemption," he said. "Christmas morning is a traditional celebration of cleansing and spiritual rebirth."

"But?" There was more to it than that and they both knew it. He didn't sound like he really believed the angels wanted to redeem him and from what Sasha had seen of the angels in the last few hours, she didn't blame him.

He grunted, biceps bulging impressively as he applied leverage to the poker. The first manacle broke open and he smiled, the same fierce baring of teeth she had never seen on his face before tonight.

"Jay?"

"Redemption isn't offered lightly," he admitted, going to work on the second shackle. "It's more likely..."

The ringtone version of "Jingle Bells" blared cheerily from her pocket. Sasha grabbed her cell phone, staring at it like it was possessed. Four bars. She had better cell reception in Hell than in most of Malibu.

She checked the caller ID. Joan Crawford, herself. "It's my mother. She's probably still freaked you aren't coming for Christmas. Maybe I should tell her you're a demon."

"Half demon," he corrected.

"Devilspawn."

"Can't argue with that one."

Voicemail caught the call and the phone went silent. Only to instantly start ringing again.

"She's just going to keep calling until I answer it." The woman might look like a goddess, but she had the persistence of a terrier. "I'll turn it off."

"Take it."

Sasha gaped at him. "I'm not going to take a call from my mother in Hell."

"She'll worry all night if you ignore it. Tell her you can't talk now and you'll call her back."

An evil demon considering her mother's feelings--there was something off about that. Especially since *she* hadn't considered them for a second. She was a worse daughter than a demon. It was a humbling thought. She hit Send.

"Hey, Mom. I can't really talk right now."

"Oh, sweetie, I'm so glad I caught you and if you can't talk that's perfectly okay. You just listen."

"That wasn't what I meant--"

The second shackle broke with a grinding metal *crack*.

"I need to apologize for pushing you about Jay. Your father says I was acting like his mother about this and God forbid anyone have grounds to compare me to that woman."



I take back all of my bullying. It has never been in the spirit of Christmas in *this* household to emotionally blackmail your children and I'm so sorry if it has been causing strain on your relationship. I never meant to pressure--"

The first wrist shackle popped open with a muted *clink* and the minions scuttled closer, something black and scaled teasing into the radius of light cast by the candles.

"Mom, this really isn't a good time."

"Is he there now?" her mother stage-whispered into the phone. "Can I speak with him? I really ought to apologize to both of you." Her voice had risen about two octaves on the last sentence, which she always thought made her sound more trustworthy, but only made it obvious she was trying to get away with something.

"I'm not putting him on the phone with you so you can try to badger him into coming again, Mother."

"I won't!" her mother protested, all innocence. "Just let me apologize directly. It means so much more coming personally, don't you think?"

The minions rustling in the shadows grew louder. "We're in the middle of a fight, Mom." *Or we're about to be.*

"Oh, I knew it! It's all my fault. I'm so sorry, baby. Just don't go to bed angry. And use your womanly wiles. Men will forgive anything if you wile them enough."

Sasha cringed. She did *not* want to know what her mother thought *wile* was a euphemism for.

"Do you need some motherly advice? On the wiles?"

"No! Mother, I do not want tips on using my wiles from

you. Thank you."

Jay's lips twitched. Sasha wished she still had the poker so she could thump him with it.

"If you're sure, sweetie..."

"I'm extremely sure."

The last manacle didn't crack open like the others had, but Jay managed to warp the metal enough to squeeze his hand out, leaving a chunk of his skin behind. As if that was their cue, the minions went into a frenzy, scuttling forward and darting into the light only to retreat again, snarling and hissing.

"Gotta go, Mom." *Hell's attacking.* "Merry Christmas."

She hit End before she heard her mother's reply and pocketed the cell phone. She handed Jay her Walther semi-automatic and an extra clip. He grinned, chambering a round like a pro. "Your wives are great, by the way."

"Shut up, you." With a Desert Eagle in her left hand and a throwing knife in her right, she was as ready for Hell's fury as she would ever be.

A minion came into range and Jay fired first, earning a squeal and a hasty retreat, but others were circling closer, coming at them from all sides. "Back to back." Before she could turn her back on him, Jay caught her arm with his free hand and pulled her in for a fast, hard kiss.

He released her, firing a round over her shoulder and gaining another high-pitched shriek before putting his back to her. She spun and put her shoulder blades against his, her lips still tingling.

"What was that? For luck?"

His hand brushed her thigh below the holster. "Your mouth has been distracting me since you walked in. Can't afford any distractions right now."

Sasha pursed her lips, trying not to smile, but she could feel the corners curling upward. *Smooth bastard*. Who the hell was this guy?

Then minions rushed them and she stopped smiling.



## Chapter Eight

### When the Hordes of Hell Attack

Sasha flung the knife at the first black-shelled insect thing that scuttled into the light. The blade bounced off with a metallic *plink* and clattered to the ground. "Shit." She squeezed the trigger. The bug erupted into a violet fireball. "Holy *mother*," Sasha swore, staggering away from the blast. The Desert Eagle had virtually no kick, but the minion exploded like she'd tagged it with a rocket launcher.

"Angel fire," Jay explained, his voice as steady as the metronome repetition of the Walther's report.

Demonic screams made her ears ache, but before their fallen comrade had even stopped burning more minions were crawling over the ashy remains to get to her. Sasha fired twice in quick succession and two more explosions of violet fire lit the shadows--shadows that were roiling with black figures.

*I don't have that many bullets.*

"Jay, we need an exit." She fired two more times. Two more incinerated demons, two fewer rounds in the clip. "Now."

"Get to a wall." His voice was perfectly calm, like they were discussing which movie to see on a regular Friday night. "We'll make an exit."

Sasha wasn't sure she liked that plan--blasting your way out tended to have the nasty side effect of bringing the

building down on top of you. She began inching toward the nearest wall anyway, trusting he knew his way around Hell.

They'd only made it a few feet when Jay staggered against her, swearing.

"Are you hit?"

"No, but I think they've figured out the regular bullets won't kill them."

*Oh, that is definitely not good.* That limited their effective ammo to the freakish angel-rounds.

Sasha ducked beneath Jay's arm and pivoted in front of him, firing three quick bursts at compass points to send the minions scurrying back. "My right hip. Take the other Desert Eagle."

Jay loosed the other gun from the holster and took aim, but the trigger just clicked repeatedly.

She could have sworn she'd checked the clip. "Empty?" *Goddamn angel gave me an empty gun.*

"It won't let me fire it. I don't have the right blood. Here." Jay shoved the Desert Eagle at her and slid the katana from her spine-sheath.

The sword gleamed, reflecting the bursts of angel fire. Jay bent over it, whispering guttural words over the metal. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him nick his finger on the blade. His blood bubbled up for a moment, then the blade flashed and absorbed the dark red demon's blood, drinking it down. Catching her eye, Jay grinned ferally and swung the katana in a sweeping arc, slicing through three demons in a single strike. They fell and didn't move again.

"Much better," he growled, taking a professional stance and slashing into the writhing horde.

Sasha got out of his way and edged toward the wall again, picking her targets carefully and going for twofers whenever possible to conserve ammo. But all too soon, the first Desert Eagle clicked empty. She holstered it and braced both hands around her remaining weapon—which fired three more shots and then clicked dreadfully hollow. "I'm out."

"What? How's that possible?"

"Guns only fire the number of rounds they can hold, Jay. That's how these things work."

"It's an angelic gun."

"It still needs bullets," Sasha snapped, retreating quickly and losing all the ground she'd gained toward the wall when the demons surged forward.

Jay cursed. "Give it to me." Still wielding the katana one-handed, he extended a hand to her for the gun.

Sasha slapped it into his palm, taking her attention off the demonic minions for a fraction too long. They charged forward, knocking her legs out from under her.

"Sasha!" Jay shouted and she saw another dozen rush him as she disappeared beneath a black tide.

The first thing any stunt performer learns is how to fall without hurting herself—but that lesson's effectiveness depended on the hordes of Hell not following her onto the ground and trying to slash her open with their claws.

She rolled to the ground, half a dozen demons swarming

over her.

Her years of martial arts training would have been put to very good use--except martial arts were built around human physiology. These demonic creatures weren't humanoid in their movements or their reactions. Minions apparently came in all different shapes and sizes, but they all moved like insects. Sasha had no idea where to punch or kick insects to disable them. Squashing had always been her preferred method of debilitation.

*Karma's a bitch.*

Sasha shielded her face with her arms and tucked her knees to her chest as the demons slashed at her. Thick black claws dug parallel gashes in her forearms. She screamed as the skin and flesh ripped, blood splattering out.

A sizzling sound and black smoke rose up where her blood touched the minions, burning them like acid. They screamed and snarled, retreating from her in a wave.

*Great, my superpower is bleeding on people. 'Cuz that's not inconvenient.*

Jay was at her side in an instant, pulling her to her feet and slapping the grip of the Desert Eagle against her palm. "It's reloaded. How bad?"

"I'm fine. It's nothing. Where did you get the ammo?"

"Magic." He kept one arm around her as he swung the katana in a poetic arc. With the blood dripping from her forearm keeping the minions back on one side and Jay's sword on the other, they made it to the stone wall. He



nudged the hand holding the reloaded Desert Eagle. "Fire at the wall."

*And bring the room down around our ears. Check.*

Sasha hesitated a moment before squeezing the trigger. Fifteen minutes ago she'd wondered if she could ever trust another word out of Jay's mouth and now she was about to fire into a stone wall in Hell on nothing more than his say so. Sending a blast of angel fire into the wall was somehow so much easier than breaching the walls around her heart.

The wall burst inward with a whoosh, the edges peeling back like a warp drive engaging. Jay hauled her through the opening before she had a chance to question the wisdom of jumping into a black hole in Hell. With a squeal and a clatter of claws, the minions scrambled after them. Jay decapitated--or at least chopped off large, headlike appendages from--the ones stupid or determined enough to follow them through.

She raised the Desert Eagle to fire into the opening, but Jay shook his head sharply. "Let it heal."

She blinked, realizing what he meant. The hole in the wall--or wound, apparently--knit behind them, sealing off the last snarls of the minions.

Sasha rested the Desert Eagle against her thigh, cradling her other arm to keep the blood from dripping down onto her hand and slicking her grip. Her breathing sounded unnaturally loud in the sudden hush of the new chamber. She was panting like she'd run ten miles, but Jay was icy calm, coolly controlled.

His bare chest was filthy and covered with blood, but the strength on display there was enough to make her mouth water. The face she'd always thought of as mild and inoffensive was cut in harsh, intense lines of concentration. He exuded strength and control—which was sexy as all hell.

*Gotta love a man who can go through Hell looking that good.*

Sasha threw up a mental stop sign. She did *not* have to love that man—or rather, that *demon*. He'd lied to her for *months*. Sure, she'd never been as turned on by him as she was right now, but how could she trust him?

Now that she could breathe again, she wasn't even sure she wanted to get him out of Hell.

To get her eyes off his abs, Sasha surveyed this new quarter of the Underworld.

The room they'd stumbled into resembled a Turkish palace more than anything else. Fabrics with geometric patterns in a symphony of vibrant colors draped the walls and columns around the room. Curving stairs led down to a pool at the center of the room, beneath a domed ceiling tiled with a breathtaking mosaic. There were no light fixtures, but sunlight seemed to seep through the walls, making the room as bright as a desert at midday. The overall effect was beautiful, lush and decadent. More paradise than purgatory.

"Wow."

Jay grunted and strode to the nearest hanging. He tore a strip from the cloth a little more viciously than was strictly

necessary, and returned to her side, briefly examining the cuts in her arm before binding it tightly in the turquoise fabric.

"What is this place?"

"No place we want to stay," he said sharply.

"I'm still deciding if I want to go anywhere with you," she warned him, flexing her arm to test the mobility of the bandage. It was perfect--tight enough to be firm, but loose enough to allow movement. This new Jay obviously had triage experience. Wasn't he just full of surprises tonight?

"You can decide to hate me when we're out of this room."

"This seems like a perfectly good place to decide whether or not I want to hate you."

He grimaced. "Looks can be deceiving. Especially here. Let's go."

Sasha was tempted to slip her hand out of his grasp when he tried to pull her toward a fabric-covered arch at the opposite end of the room, but she wasn't feeling quite that stupid. Liar or not, Jay knew Hell and while she might not trust him to be honest with her, he'd proven he could protect her. Until they were topside, protection was valued at a premium.

She hustled in his wake, though she spared a longing glance at the clean fresh water in the pool. Being covered in sticky gore--particularly her own--had never really been a favorite pastime, and she didn't trust minion claws not to be infected with something nasty. But apparently washing her

arm was a delay they couldn't afford. The tension in Jay's shoulders told her wherever they were, it wasn't where they wanted to be.

"Leaving so soon, darling? And here I was hoping you would introduce me to your little friend."

The voice was purring, sweet and high--sugar coating every word--and it still made chills shoot down Sasha's spine.

Jay slammed on the brakes. "*Fuck*. Don't say *anything*," he hissed hurriedly before he turned toward the voice. Sasha could see each muscle in his body lock down Fort Knox-tight. "Jezebeth." The word was a curse and did nothing to quiet Sasha's deafening unease.

"Jevroth. For shame. Is that any way to greet your mother?"

Sasha's vague sense of dread solidified. *Lovely. The in-laws.*



## Chapter Nine

### Hell Hath No Fury Like Satan's Mistress

The demoness Jezebeth didn't look like anyone's mother, but if ever a woman was sultry enough to tempt Lucifer himself, she'd just walked into the room.

Petite and feminine, her lush curves were accentuated rather than concealed by the crimson bikini-mini-skirt-and-straps concoction she was almost wearing. Sasha had seen exotic dancers in more modest clothing. Jezebeth's unbound hair swirled like a midnight cloud around her hips as she oozed toward them, a sexy little pout on her lips. She didn't look like she had a maternal bone in her body.

Jay put a hand on Sasha's hip and guided her behind him so his broad shoulders partially blocked her view. His chest seemed to expand as he loomed protectively between her and his mother. His petite, utterly harmless-looking mother.

*Looks are deceiving. Especially here.*

"You weren't going to leave without seeing me, were you, Jevroth? After all the trouble I've gone to bringing you home?" She almost sang the words, kitten-soft and petulant like a child, but Sasha heard the threat in them.

The Bettie Page demoness who looked about twenty years too young to be Jay's mommy began circling them, kitten heels clacking on the Turkish marble tiles. Jay shifted slowly as she circled, keeping his body between them.

"No, my son wouldn't do that. Not when he knows how it would reflect on me." Jezebeth caught the trailing edge of one of the gauzy hangings, running it through her fingers. "And not when he knows how I've been longing to meet his girlfriend."

Sasha couldn't help it. She snorted out a laugh.

Jezebeth's smile was arctic, dangerous. "Amused, my dear?"

Jay shot her a dark look over his shoulder. A shut-the-fuck-up look if she'd ever seen one, but something reckless uncoiled in Sasha's breast and she shot him a go-screw-yourself look and smiled sweetly. "It's just that I've been trying to get Jay to meet my parents for ages. I can totally empathize."

Jay made a choking noise, turning a little purple as she bonded with his mother.

Jezebeth studied her, eyes narrowed as she judged everything about her. "You're a lovely thing, aren't you? But then I suppose I should have expected as much, considering your lineage. You have his look about you. Around the eyes, mostly."

*Whose look?* "Wh--"

"I never get to meet Jevroth's ladyloves." Jezebeth pouted, cutting off Sasha's question in favor of the sound of her own voice. "You'd almost think he was ashamed of me."

"My mother said almost exactly the same thing. I tried to explain that it had nothing to do with her. Jay's commitment issues are his own problem."

"Sasha." Jay's shut-the-fuck-up look was getting more forceful by the second.

"No, no, Jevroth, she's only telling the truth. And I know *exactly* what she means," Jezebeth said, her black eyes flashing angrily. "Try waiting a couple *millennia* for your lover to commit to you, flitting off on affairs with succubi whenever he bloody well pleases but unleashing the wrath of Hell if you even look at another demon lord. *Men.*"

When she put it that way, Jezebeth did have a teensy bit more grounds for complaint than Sasha did in her measly six-month affair with a lying son-of-a-demon.

"But he's mine now. Him and all the Dominions of Hell," Jezebeth purred and Sasha experienced the unsettling sensation of feeling sorry for Lucifer. "And I'm sure you realize, my dear, I won't be allowing anything to jeopardize that. Especially not some pipsqueak angels' pawn with a Champion's contract."

*And here they'd been getting along so well.*

"Nothing personal, darling, but if you think you're going to take Jay out of here tonight and derail the plan I spent four hundred years developing, I'm afraid you're about to discover what real evil looks like."

Jay had gotten out of position, letting Jezebeth creep around for a better angle on Sasha, but now he moved to block her entirely, giving her a great view of his muscular back and nothing else.

"Out of the way, Jevroth."

"Touch her over my dead body," Jay growled, raising the



katana.

"Do you dare threaten your own mother?"

"You threaten Sasha."

"You would challenge the Queen of Hell for a mortal girl you haven't even known a year?" Jezebeth laughed sharply. "I raised you to be smarter than that."

"You raised me to pick my battles. I pick this one."

A deep voice rippled across the chamber, rich with power. "You aren't having a battle without me, are you?"

"*Luc.*" Sasha couldn't see Jezebeth, but she could clearly hear her voice raise to a wheedling baby-talk pitch. "Jevroth won't let me kill the angels' little pawn."

"That is quite cruel of him," the voice of Luc--which Sasha *really* hoped wasn't short for Lucifer--replied.

She heard footsteps and then a tall, blond man with crystal-blue eyes came into view. For a moment, Sasha stopped breathing and just stared. He made Uriel's heart-stopping angelic beauty pale in comparison. Charisma and a sense of power poured off him. A white dress shirt and tailored pants were hardly demonic attire, but Sasha knew instantly that *this* was the most famous fallen angel to ever exist. The Morning Star, Light Bringer and ruler of the Underworld. Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness himself.

"Jay," Satan said casually, nodding to her lover. "Good to see you."

"Sir." Jay lowered the katana slightly, bowing his head. *My boyfriend is on a first-name basis with the Devil.*

Sasha's brain shut down in protest.

"Your mother seems set on killing someone," the Root of All Evil said conversationally. He studied Sasha from head to foot, as if searching for the source of his bride's irritation. "I do hate to disappoint her."

There must have been some unspoken signal in those words, because Jay relaxed visibly, stepping aside so he was no longer acting as her personal demon shield. "I guess we have a problem then, sir, because I'm not going to let anyone hurt Sasha," he said.

"It is a conundrum." Lucifer linked his hands behind his back. "Perhaps if she weren't holding the angel's sword it might soften your mother's feelings toward her."

"She threatens you, my love. Yet another reason to kill her," Jezebeth said eagerly, kitten heels slapping the tiles as she pranced to Lucifer's side to coo up at him.

Sasha looked down at the angelic Desert Eagle, surprised to find it still in her hand. She quickly holstered it and began stammering an apology, but Lucifer held up his hand and the words stalled in her throat.

"I'm sure you didn't mean to bring a weapon into my presence. Did you, Miss Christian?"

"No, of course not," Sasha said quickly, raising her now-empty hands as if that could confirm the innocence of her intentions.

Lucifer approached, his smile so charming she felt all her reservations about him melting under its warmth. "You understand my difficulty, Miss Christian," he said, his blue

eyes entreating. "My bride wants you dead and I so wish to please her, but my new stepson is ready to defend your life with his own and he is less expendable. A demon with his unique gifts is so valuable."

She knew she shouldn't ask, but..."His gifts?"

Lucifer tapped his temple. "Reading minds. Very rare, you know."

*Reading...* Sasha's stomach took a swan dive toward her toes. Suddenly every thought she'd ever had in Jay's presence was subject to reevaluation. The concept of privacy vanished. An intense sense of violation rolled over her. Every time he gave her that searching look, was he really digging around in her head?

Sasha stepped backward, needing some distance between herself and the demon who had managed to find yet another thing to conceal from her. *Mind reading. Jesus Christ.* She sidled away until she had a clear view of all the players--now didn't seem to be the time to be walking into anything blind.

"If I can't kill her, just let me torture her a little," Jezebeth pleaded, pouting prettily and tossing a tennis-ball-sized fireball between her fingertips.

Lucifer smiled indulgently. Jay just stood there, infuriatingly impassive.

Sasha wanted nothing more than to scream at him, but first she needed to get away from Lucifer and his pet psychopath--who just happened to be Jay's mother. *Dodged a bullet mixing with that gene pool.*

She tried to remember the gatekeeper's instructions for negotiating in Hell. How did it start? Give a compliment to figure out what they really want. How did that even work? And what could the Prince of Darkness want from her? For that matter, what did the Devil want from *anyone*? He was the Devil. He'd fought *God* and been cast down from Heaven only to build an empire for himself in Hell. If ever someone knew how to take what he wanted, it was Lucifer.

*What do you get for the Devil who has everything?*

"You're looking well, sir. Married life seems to agree with you." Jay spoke before she could. Unease snaked through her mind at the idea that he might have been trolling through her thoughts even now.

"Does it?" Lucifer's laugh echoed through the room.

Sasha realized she was smiling like an idiot, enchanted into submission by the sound. Even Jezebeth and Jay didn't appear to be immune to Lucifer dark, compelling radiance. Jezebeth giggled coyly and Jay's lips quirked up in a hint of a smile.

Shaking off the spell of his laugh, Sasha studied the world's most famous villain. He was supernaturally good-looking, supernaturally charming, and Hell was at his feet, but everyone wanted something. Demons were notoriously ambitious by nature. So what was Lucifer's current ambition? And how could she use it against him?

"I've been remiss not to visit since the wedding, but now that I'm here, I suppose it falls to me to ask you what your intentions toward my mother are?"

Lucifer went still, his eyes alert, a small smile curving his lips. "My intentions?"

"Why did you marry her?" Jay asked, the slightest edge of challenge in his voice.

Sasha felt certain she was missing the significance of this conversation. The undercurrents in the room were so far beneath her depth she could barely feel them, but Jay was doing something. It'd be nice if she had the first clue what it was.

"She thinks you only married her to gain more access to me--but you were already more father to me than any other creature on Hell or earth. You had all the influence you needed. So why agree to marriage after all these centuries?"

Lucifer's good cheer vanished. "What are you playing at, Jay?"

"I want to live on the mortal plane. Indefinitely."

His mother gasped, horrified. "*Jevroth*. How can you mean that? Why would you want to leave Hell to live among the filthy, small-minded humans?"

Jay continued speaking, pleading his case directly to Lucifer. "I never belonged here and to *some* it is risky to have me here. If I stay I will never be anything other than a tool in the power games. A dangerous tool."

"Jay," Jezebeth pleaded, her voice unnaturally high. More fireballs began orbiting her like hyperactive moons. "You belong here. You're a demon. Where else would you belong?"

"There are no secrets around me." Jay ignored his mother, his dark eyes intent on Lucifer. "And some secrets are bombs just waiting to be detonated. If, for example, I were to tell my mother how you--"

"Jevroth." The single word was a command. Lucifer didn't need to raise his voice to freeze Jay's words in the air. "Leaving isn't without risks."

"I'll take my chances with redemption. I love Sasha--without manipulations or power plays."

Lucifer arched one golden brow. "You show your human side tonight. But love without conditions, manipulations and power plays--that isn't the demon way. You will tire of it, much more quickly than you think. I would have grown bored of your mother centuries ago if I didn't suspect she was secretly trying to dethrone me and rule in my stead."

"Oh, Luc," Jezebeth said, blushing prettily.

Trust the psycho to be flattered by being suspected of treachery.

"Are you afraid?" Sasha asked, then shuddered as all eyes in the room locked on her. But she kept talking, hoping she wasn't digging her own grave. "Sure, everyone knows you can hold your throne by manipulation and deceit. No one can outmaneuver Lucifer. But if they had a choice, if *Jezebeth* had a choice, would you still rule? I think you covet respect that isn't forced, but freely given. Love that isn't bought, but a gift."

The Devil laughed. "Save me from the humans and their psychotherapists."

"I think you want your people--demons, whatever--to choose you. But they can't do that unless you give them the chance to choose--"

"Stop. It's adorable, your attempt to fight for young Jay. But I will not give him the choice to leave any more than I will give you the choice whether I allow Jezebeth to kill you. You cannot persuade me, my dear."

Sasha's heart plummeted.

Lucifer steepled his fingers in front of his lips, studying Jay. "It's a dangerous game you play, Jay, threatening the Devil. Are you sure she's worth it? It's still a risk."

"I'll take my chances."

"If I allow it--"

"Luc! You can't honestly be considering this. He's my son. Mine." Jezebeth stomped a dainty foot, sparks shooting from her fingertips to singe the tiles.

"And what's yours is mine, my dear. I've decided it's time young Jay left the nest."

"Lucifer!" Jezebeth shrieked.

The Devil ignored her, waving them toward the arched doorway. "Go on. Both of you. Before I change my mind."

Jay started to reach for her, but Sasha ducked away from his hand. Mind reading. His lies just kept snowballing.

"I'm not finished with you, angelspawn!" Jezebeth screamed and the door in front of them burst into flames.

Sasha gasped and fell back away from the searing heat. Jay caught her, her back pressing against his chest as his arms steadied her.

*"Jezebeth,"* Lucifer roared and the room quaked. This was one lovers' spat Sasha *really* didn't want to be in the middle of.

"Come on," Jay whispered against her ear. "It's an illusion." He began to guide her toward the flaming door, but Sasha balked as the heat from the flames made her skin feel baked.

"I can feel them," she protested.

"My mother can't conjure fireballs, but she's Queen of Lies. Trust me, it's an illusion."

*Trust him.* Always those damn words.

As the room shuddered again, Sasha put her hand into his. "Don't make me regret this."

Closing her eyes, she let him pull her straight into the fire.





## Chapter Ten

### Truths & Consequences

As soon as they touched the flames, the sensation of heat vanished. Running through the doorway, they stumbled into a hallway that matched the blandness of her first foray into Hell, but this time Sasha knew the beige paint was hiding secrets. She'd found nothing but secrets here so far.

Jay began to pull her down the hall and Sasha slipped her hand from his grasp. "I'm not going one more step with you until..." *Until what?* She couldn't even issue a good ultimatum. Her brain was still playing catch-up from the satanic duel she'd just started.

Jay backtracked to her side. "I know you have questions, but we don't have time right now for an interrogation. We have to get you back to the mortal plane."

"We have hours before dawn." And even though he knew the way, she couldn't be dependent on him to get her out right now. They'd gone beyond questions and mistrust. She needed to get away from him. Just a few minutes out of his presence to think, to sort everything through.

"We don't have hours," Jay said, patience in every word. "Time works differently here. We have an hour, max, and the exits aren't always where you leave them. Hell's like a casino--everything is designed to bring you in and keep you here. Getting out is always a challenge, even if you know the way, so we need to *run*. Unless you want to be stuck in

Hell with me forever?"

"Running is good."

They jogged in air-conditioner-humming silence through a maze of corridors which occasionally rumbled with earthquake tremors--reminders that Lucifer and Jezebeth were still going at it.

"Are they going to kill each other?" she asked, grateful for her morning cardio routine so she was only panting a little.

"They haven't yet," Jay replied, not even a tiny bit out of breath--this from the man whose exercise regimen consisted of sitting on the couch with a remote control. Demonic physiology was just unfair.

"What did you threaten him with?"

"I can read his mind," Jay admitted. "I can see he loves her. I implied that if I stayed in Hell I would tell her."

Telling Satan's wife he loved her was their get-out-of-Hell-free card. She couldn't make sense of this world.

Sasha's thoughts raced, replaying the last hour as her emotions swung back and forth like a pendulum. Jay had told the ruler of the Underworld that he loved her, but his mother was the Queen of Lies and the apple didn't fall far from the tree. He'd protected her from the demonic minions, probably saving her life a dozen times in the last hour, but he'd also lied to her more times than she could count over the last six months. Even his behavior had been a lie. The mild-mannered Clark Kent. Sure, she'd hated the *niceness* of him, but this was swinging a bit too far in the

opposite extreme. From too-nice-for-me to demon--her heart couldn't keep up.

"Does he really love her?" she heard herself asking, because it was easier than the question she needed answered--*Can demons love?*

"In a way. In the only way he can."

That really wasn't comforting. "What way is that?"

Jay frowned. "Angels and demons...It's complicated. Love means something different when you look at your life in millennia rather than decades."

*Millennia.* She frowned, distracted by the thought. "Just how old are you, Jay?"

"Thirty-four. I told you."

"You also told me you were human and that hasn't turned out so well." Though she was unspeakably relieved she hadn't been screwing someone who'd been around for the dawn of humanity. The age difference would have been way too creepy, even if all the demons she'd seen so far were ageless and youthful. Even Gerry had a timelessness about him.

"You *assumed* I was human. And I left some stuff out I probably shouldn't have, but all the words I've spoken to you are technically true."

"Silly me not to ask you if you were a demon from Hell who could *read my mind*. That goes right to the top of the list for my next first date."

"I can't," Jay replied sharply. "Read your mind. I never could. Jezebeth created me to be a weapon against

demons, not man. The demons around me might as well be screaming their innermost thoughts in my ear, but humans are just a muddy background noise. Even when I concentrate I can't always make it out. And I could never hear you. Not even a little. Your natural shields kept me out entirely."

He grabbed her hand to pull her around a tight corner. She let him keep it--but only for steering purposes. It had nothing to do with the fact that she liked him a lot better after she found out he hadn't been rooting around in her brain.

Provided he wasn't lying.

"How am I supposed to believe you?"

Jay grimaced. "I don't know. I can promise to be honest with you until the day I die, I can tell you why I felt I had to deceive you, but I can't make you trust me."

The thing was she *did* trust him. She didn't want to, but she couldn't seem to shake the foundation they'd built. That had to be unhealthy. Dysfunctional relationships warning sign number one.

"Why lie?" she asked, avoiding the question she really wanted answered. "Was it just because you thought I'd react badly if you said you were a demon?" She probably wouldn't have believed him. Angels and demons existed, sure, but the idea that there was one hitting on you in a library stretched credibility too far.

"Part of it was habit," he admitted. "You learn early, growing up in Hell, that anything you say can be used

against you. So you learn to shut up. Especially if your mother is a deception demoness who can sense whenever someone is lying in her presence."

"Is that why you were so quiet?"

"And why Lucifer was careful never to say he wanted to do you harm. He likes you, you know."

"I'm delighted. You might have mentioned your mother is a walking lie detector before I started bullshitting her."

"I told you not to say anything. That's always safest--because if she can tell a lie, she can also sense the truth and sometimes that can be just as damning. It's why Lucifer can't say he loves her, even if he does. She would know the truth or lie in it and use it against him either way. He can't give her that power over him. The best demonic diplomacy is silence."

He pulled up suddenly, pressing her flush against the wall with an arm across her torso. "Minions ahead," he said quietly. "Jezebeth must have them guarding the exit." He swore softly.

"Is there another way out?"

"Not that we can be sure will still be open when we get there, even if we had time to go to the next one, which we don't."

"So we fight our way out." Sasha drew the reloaded Desert Eagle. "Any tips on demon killing I should know this time?"

"Aim for the body. These are lesser demons so taking out the brain doesn't slow them down much."

"I don't suppose you have another clip of angel ammo lying around?" Though she had no idea where he'd hidden the first one. Tight bloodstained jeans showcased his ass to beautiful effect but didn't leave many places to hide ammunitions.

Jay frowned, then blinked at her. "I keep forgetting you don't know all you should."

"You don't have to be a dick about it."

"No. It's just...odd. Having to explain things I've always known. The human lack of knowledge about angels and demons is stunning. And for you to be kept in the dark..."

"It's not like you guys are doing a lot to educate us," Sasha snapped. "Angels just love to perpetuate the rumors about them. They can smell sin from a mile away. They can hear impure thoughts and every time a bell rings an angel gets his wings. It's all bullshit, but we don't even know bullshit about demons. So why don't you enlighten me, oh wise one?"

"Those guns--" he gestured to the Desert Eagles, "--they aren't really guns. That's an angel's sword. I've heard of them turning into bows, staffs, whatever the user is most comfortable handling. Apparently your favorite weapon is a .44 Magnum--which isn't much of a surprise." His mouth quirked in a grin. "An angel's sword can never run out of ammunition, but they are strongly affected by the desires of the wielder. I think the only reason you were able to come up empty earlier is because you were so certain there could only be so many bullets. The sword was handicapped

by your belief. So I told you there were more, and when you believed it, there were."

Sasha frowned, remembering something else he'd said about the guns when they were pinned down by demonic minions. "Why couldn't you fire it? Because you're a demon?"

"Sort of."

Sasha glowered. "No. No more half truths. *Why?*"

"Because I don't have angelic blood."

For a moment, Sasha said nothing, trying to make sense of that. "But I'm not..."

Jay looked away down the hall, evading her eyes. "I wasn't sure, at first. I thought I sensed angel light in you, but you didn't act like them. You treated me like there might be something worth redeeming in me--which an angel would never do. Angels and their offspring are forbidden from loving demons. It would be chaos if good loved evil."

"You aren't evil," she said, addressing the only part of what he'd said that her brain could process. *I'm the farthest thing in the world from angelic.*

"I know that, but they don't. It isn't black and white, good or evil, but angels don't see grey."

"It's not true. The angel thing. I would know."

"Your mother might not even know," Jay offered.

Sasha felt the foundations of her world start to slide. "My mother?" *The Angel of Hollywood.*

"The angelic line must come through her. Didn't her father disappear shortly after she was born? Your



grandmother, Maeve Christian, she was a starlet in the forties, wasn't she? Beautiful enough to tempt an angel. She might never have known what he really was."

"The wings would have been a pretty big hint."

"They can assume a human disguise, just like demonic glamour. You would never see the difference."

"Glamour." Great. Another thing to worry about. Sasha fixated on that, so she wouldn't have to think about the earth-shattering angel thing. "Is this even what you look like?" she asked, waving to the six-pack abs and bitable ass. He probably had horns and tentacles beneath it all.

"I've never used glamour on you. It probably wouldn't have worked on an angel's granddaughter anyway."

"Could you not say the angel's granddaughter thing like you're certain it's true?"

"Sasha, you can wield an angel's sword, your blood burns lesser demons like acid, and my mother and Lucifer both recognized the light in you. I *am* certain it's true."

Jezebeth hadn't been calling her an *angels' pawn*. She'd been screaming *angelspawn*. "You said you weren't sure, at first. When did you suspect?" *And why didn't you tell me?*

"From the start," he admitted. "Can we talk about this more after we get you topside?"

The evasion twigged something at the edge of her thoughts. Sasha was through not listening to her instincts. There was something Jay wasn't telling her. She just

needed to find the right question.

"Is that why you tried to pick me up? Because you thought I was angelic?"

Jay closed his eyes and huffed out a low groan.

*Jackpot.*

"I'm going to be completely honest, because I promised I wouldn't lie to you anymore, but I would really appreciate it if you could try not to hate me for this. I don't feel this way anymore."

Sasha's grip tightened on the angelic gun. "Go on."

"During the Dark Ages, demons were allowed to wander the mortal plane freely, but our excesses and vices upset the balance of good and evil and when we meddled too much in the affairs of man, God decided to bring us into check. Christmas morning had been declared a time of rebirth--the anniversary of man's redemption and God's grace--and it was decided that no demon, or creature of demonic origin who was more evil than good, could inhabit the mortal plane on Christmas. Dawn of December twenty-fifth became known as The Cleanse--a moment when any evil being caught above would be smote by the wrath of God."

"Killed?"

"Worse. Death is a transformation of the soul's form. Smiting is banishment to the deepest level of Hell. No demon or demonspawn has ever returned from The Cleanse, and I knew I wouldn't survive it, but I wanted to remain in man's realm. When I saw you, I thought it was a

sign. If I could somehow absorb angel light, I might be able to survive and stay. I never planned on falling in love with you."

"Please stop throwing that word around. *Love* isn't a cure-all pill, Jay. Saying it doesn't magically fix everything."

"I don't know what you want me to say instead."

Sasha didn't know what she wanted to hear either. Somehow the idea that he had only approached her in the first place because he wanted to use her cut much deeper than finding out he was a lying demon. He could be a demon and a tough guy and still be her Clark Kent, but this changed him to her. After a lifetime of being used to gain access to her powerful family, Sasha had thought she'd finally found someone who was different, someone who only wanted *her*, but now it turned out he'd only been interested in her because of another branch of her family tree.

Was something wrong with her? Why could she never compete with the appeal of her pedigree?

"Why not spend Christmas dawn with my mother and me, then? Surrounded by the offspring of angels. Isn't that what you wanted?" Her voice sounded foreign, hoarse.

"Things have changed," he said, his voice equally rough. "It was always a gamble to stay above for Christmas, but I didn't have anything to lose before you. Maybe I never would have gone through with it, but I couldn't take the risk when there was a chance I could go back to Hell for Christmas and be back with you by New Year's."

"The angels...they want you out of Hell by dawn. Do they want you...cleansed? Smote?"

"That's the most likely option. They don't like it when we break the rules and get above ourselves."

"But there's another option?"

Jay shrugged. "It's possible they meant for you to redeem me. Angelic quests for redemption are usually reserved for humans, but this could be a special case."

"What would I have to do to redeem you?" She may not be sure how she felt about him right now, but she didn't want to condemn him to an eternity in Hell chained to a wall either.

"I haven't the faintest idea. Purification was never really a forte of my kind."

"Look. You get me out of here and I'll see what I can do about redeeming you, but after that we're done. Okay?"  
*That must be hands down the weirdest breakup speech in the history of mankind.*

A muscle in Jay's jaw jumped. "Fair enough."

Her throat tightened, choking off any more words. That's what she wanted, right? So why did her chest ache at the thought that he'd give up so easily? Why couldn't she stop wanting him?

\* \* \*

*Fair enough.* Luckily, demons weren't known for their fairness.

Jay didn't have to show her the way out. He didn't have to play by the rules. If he did nothing, the sun would rise with her beside him and she would never be able to walk away. Sure, she'd be trapped in Hell, but they would be together. He'd have an eternity to win her back, rather than a handful of minutes before the dawn.

He'd heard his mother's thoughts and Lucifer's. They didn't understand or trust the depth of his feelings for the angel-girl. Love beyond a person's usefulness was a concept foreign to demonkind and foreign concepts were always dangerous. If Sasha didn't redeem him, he wouldn't be allowed back on earth to pursue her. They would keep him occupied in the Underworld until her mortal lifespan was up. Even if she was likely to live longer than most thanks to her angelic heritage, Jezebeth could outwait her.

But if they stayed here together, he could protect her. He could teach her the ropes in Hell and, for a while at least, she would be totally dependent on him. It was cold and manipulative, but he'd never balked at icy practicality before. He didn't even have to do anything to make it happen. All he had to do was nothing. Delay a little longer.

The idea held a sultry temptation.

Jay gazed down at the woman at his side. Bedraggled and bruised, with a bandage on her arm and a gun in her hand, she was everything that was wild and fierce and vulnerable. His chest contracted and he swallowed thickly.

"Come on," he said, his voice buzz-saw rough. "We'd better hurry."

He ran toward the mob at the exit gate. He needed to feel his blade cutting into flesh, needed vengeance against the worlds that seemed aligned against him. If he could hack his way through, drowning in the quick rush of violence, then he wouldn't have to think about the fact that it was his fault. He had done what any demon would have done. He'd lied, deceived and manipulated Sasha, trying to bend her to his ambition, but all he'd managed to do was sabotage the one thing that could have saved him. Regret was a weakness he refused to feel, so he poured it into the blade and swung hard, slashing into the mindless minion hordes at the door.

He might be beyond redemption, but he could still see Sasha free of the Hell of his making.



## Chapter Eleven

### Angels We Have Heard in Hollywood

Jay fought like a man possessed--which considering his demonic background, wasn't such a stretch. Gore flew and blood splattered in a horror-movie montage. Sasha followed tightly in the wake he cut through the minions, firing whenever anything lunged at his unprotected back. The gate was thirty feet away, then twenty, then five. It was over so quickly. Before the battle had fully begun they were through the doorway, spilling into the murky twilight of the pre-dawn night.

Tall, coarse grass tangled around her ankles as she spun, ready to obliterate anything that came through after them, but the minions shied back, hovering on the other side of the portal.

"They can sense the dawn," Jay said behind her. "They won't follow. We don't have long."

Sasha spun to face him and found herself looking out over the lights of Los Angeles. The portal had dropped them in the Hollywood Hills, not far from the iconic sign. A suitably dramatic setting for their farewell. And it had to be a farewell. Neither of them knew how to redeem him.

"Jay..." She didn't know what she was going to say. *Have a nice life?* She'd thought they were going to break up yesterday and it had been depressing but not heartbreaking. Now, after everything they'd been through in



the last hours, why did it feel like she was giving up The One? She wasn't even sure she believed in The One. Was it just the intensity of the night? The bond of surviving together? Or could it be him?

"I'm sorry about how things turned out," he said when she couldn't find the words. "I'm sorry I lied to you. I'm sorry I thought I could use you. But even though I should probably regret ever meeting you after what I've put you through tonight, I can't. I'm glad I got to be with you, for however short a time, Sasha. I lo--" He broke off, grimacing. "I guess I'll stop throwing that word around. But I'll be...thinking of you. You'll always have my...regard."

He nodded once, as if he'd said his piece and was satisfied. Sasha was anything but. He started toward the portal and Sasha's feet rushed to stop him before she even realized she was moving. "Jay, *wait*."

He turned to look at her just as a burst of light split the darkness, illuminating his face in a brilliant white glow. The snap of wings was loud in the pre-dawn silence as a shimmering angelic warrior touched down between them.

"You succeeded," Zacharael's emotionless rumble intoned.

"How do I redeem Jay?" she demanded. Sasha didn't know how close the dawn was, but she wasn't going to waste time.

The angel watched her, ignoring Jay's existence, his face as blank as ever. "How did you find the Underworld?" Small talk. Great. "It wasn't what I expected. How does

redemption work?"

"Not as you expected how?"

Was this some kind of test? "I didn't think Hell would smell like lemon Pledge, okay? I expected fire and brimstone. The classics."

His wings rose and fell slightly--an angelic shrug. "It is both."

"So I'm just lucky you didn't send me into the inferno part, is that it? Can you redeem Jay now?"

"You are very human," the angel said, displaying the first hint of emotion--a mild, impersonal surprise.

Sasha glared at him. "You might have told me about the angel blood thing."

"No," he said softly, with a low ache that made Sasha's eyes tear up just hearing it. "I could not. This, giving you this chance, is all I am allowed to do."

Sasha studied the angel with a growing sense of familiarity. *Something about the eyes.* Suspicion took root in her thoughts. "Why?"

"Ordinarily your Jay would be banished to Hell for the length of your time on earth and you would never see or hear from him again, but I wanted you to have the chance to--"

"The chance you didn't have with my grandmother," Sasha finished for him. He seemed so cold, but now she saw fissures in his wintry shell and beneath the angelic hauteur lay an echoing sadness. "Why did you leave her?"

"When you are called back to Heaven, angelic duty is

not something you are allowed to shirk. It was not *choice* as you know it, but it was my first and only regret. Leaving Maeve."

"She never married. She said she never stopped loving my mother's father." *This* was her mother's father. This angelic creature who didn't look old enough to run for public office. Oddly, the thought wasn't as disturbing as it might have been. There was something paternal in Zacharael.

"I know. I did not want her daughter's child to be alone as she was. This was the only chance I could give--to allow you to stay with the one you love."

"So Jay can stay now? He's redeemed?"

"That is in your hands. Forgiveness and love are yours to offer, not mine. If you can embrace the good in him and he is truly more good than evil, The Cleanse will not harm him. He will stay on the mortal plane, no longer a demon, but not truly human either, released from his demonic obligations. But if you cannot truly love the demon, then it is best to send him back now, so that he may live out the rest of eternity below."

"Can't you do something? You're an angel."

"It is not my choice," Zacharael explained gently. He glanced at the sky. "You have some time yet, before the dawn, to decide." Then the angel actually smiled. "I'll need my sword back, though."

Sasha nodded, relieved to have something else to focus on for the moment, pushing the decision back a bit more.

"Thanks for the loan."

She extended the two Desert Eagles butt-first to Zacharael. He reached out and lifted them from her hands. The second they left her fingers, the metal shimmered and shifted, transforming back to the long, wicked sword she'd seen him wearing when he appeared in her kitchen.

"What are you angel of anyway, that you need a sword like that?"

"Surrender," Zacharael said with a soft smile.

"As in *surrender or else*?"

"As in the surrender of meaningless cares. I help to release the attachments to physical things. I think He sent me Maeve so I would be gentler in my commission, to give me an understanding of the pull of the mortal world."

"You're never angry with Him? For making you give her up?"

Zacharael smiled sadly. "My anger is never greater than my fear of the Fall. Better a slave in Heaven than a king in Hell."

"Hell didn't seem that bad. At least the part of it I saw."

"It is that bad," Zacharael and Jay said simultaneously.

"Even the part of it you saw," Zacharael continued. "You are human. You see only one thing when really it is all."

"Is this one of those theological issues where we're supposed to ignore the contradictions and evidence of our own eyes because of faith? Like how angels always say they don't see the differences between the religions? They can't all be true."

"We see things differently," Zacharael said simply.

"Contradictions coexist within the truth because they do. You think if A and B oppose, it must be one and not the other, but I see both. We do not say in God anything is possible. We say in God *all* things are possible."

"All things except good loving evil, right?"

"Do not mistake the possible and the permissible." He glanced again at the eastern sky. "And if you truly believe he is evil, he'd best be going. Dawn approaches." His wings stretched out, angling to test the air. "It was my pleasure to meet you, even if only for a moment."

"I won't be seeing you again?"

"Not in this life, but I'll be watching over you, Sasha. I always have."

He launched himself into the sky, his wings beating hard as they raised him higher, a white shadow on the deep grey sky. As she watched him fade from view, Sasha felt the last of her delaying tactics diminishing with him. She looked down from the sky to find Jay watching her, his expression guarded.

"Interesting guy, your grandpa."

It was decision time. The moment of truth.

Sasha looked at Jay and knew what she had to do--even if he would hate her for it. She had promised him redemption if it was within her power, but now she knew she couldn't do it. She couldn't take the chance that she would fail. Jay was trusting in her angelic nature, but she was too human. There were too many shades of grey in her white light. She knew herself well enough to know there just

wasn't enough good in her to save him. She couldn't let him take that risk.

So Sasha forced herself to meet Jay's eyes squarely and say in a voice that was smooth and ice-cold, "You need to leave now. I can't help you."

Jay's black eyes narrowed. "Coward."



## Chapter Twelve

### Dawn of the Damned

"Excuse me if I don't think it's a good idea for you to risk an eternity in the deepest, darkest pit of Hell," Sasha snapped.

"I'm glad to hear you aren't itching to have me smote to the nth circle of Hell, but this isn't about The Cleanse and you know it." Jay shook his head angrily. "You and your goddamn walls. You can never let yourself lean on anyone, can you?" He stalked toward her, using his size to loom over her. "Explain something to me. How is it a woman can march into Hell, fight off hordes of demonic minions, argue with the Devil himself and still be chicken-shit scared out of her mind at the prospect of letting herself love someone?"

"This isn't about me."

"Are you sure about that? Ever since we met you've been holding me at a distance, keeping a part of yourself hidden from me."

"I've been hiding things from you?"

He went on as if she hadn't spoken. "I know you think you can't trust anyone, that everyone is trying to use you--"

"You *were* trying to use me!"

"But I didn't. I never have. You can crucify me for my shitty intentions, but what have I actually done that was so terrible?"

"Besides the lying?" And repeatedly saving her life, and making her feel more alive and *special* than she ever had.



"I left a few things out," he snapped. "Are you honestly telling me you don't have secrets? You never tell me anything about your family, your upbringing--"

"I wanted you to meet my mother."

"As a *test*. To see if I would react the way you wanted me to react. To see if I would prove myself to you. Not because you trust me. Not because you *care* about me."

"How can I trust you?" she shouted. "How can I care about you when you've been lying to me since the day we met?" But the truth was she *did* care. And she trusted him. How idiotic was that?

"Everything wasn't a lie, Sasha. We weren't a lie."

"Yes, we were. *You* were. How could I fall in love with someone if I don't even know who he is?"

"You know me. I'm still the same guy. I was just trying not to be quite so...demonic around you. I can still be that guy--"

"No, don't." Sasha huffed out a bitter laugh. "The truth is I like you better as yourself than when you were trying so hard to be good. There was always something missing in the sterilized version of you. But how could I ever trust a demon?"

"You want me to prove myself? Fine. I'll go back to Hell. God forbid you think I want to use you to stay here. But you are going to listen to me before I leave. You are going to hear every damn word."

He caught her by the shoulders, cupped the back of her neck roughly and stared down into her face with an intensity that was both terrifying and thrilling. Superman on fire.

Sasha's breathing quickened.

"Being a demon was everything I knew. When I met you, I felt like I'd been struck by lightning. At the time, all I saw was how useful you could be to me, but in my world love is a vulnerability we mask with practicality. If you hadn't been useful, I wouldn't have been able to let myself love you-- falling in love with *you*, independent of how you could be of use to me, was a foreign concept. I didn't lie when I said love is different to angels and demons. Humans laud it and cherish it, but in our world it's a weakness to be exploited.

"You taught me to be human, taught me how to love the human way and live in the moment. When we met, I wanted to use you as my ticket out of the Underworld, but that isn't why I'm here now. I'm yours, Sasha. I can't imagine spending an eternity without you."

Her heart pounded, feeling like it might burst out of her chest at any moment. "That's some speech."

"I'm not giving up," he growled, the words a dark promise. "I'm going back to Hell, but I'll spend the next hundred years fighting my way back to you, if that's what it takes."

He kissed her, a hard, fast invasion of her mouth that exploded like angel fire on her tongue. She could taste his hunger, desperation and the press of urgency as he memorized her mouth. *A last kiss.*

He released her and turned away, leaving her swaying on her feet as he strode quickly toward the black hole smudge that was the Hell portal.

He was right. She'd told herself that she couldn't offer him redemption because she was scared she wasn't good enough to save him--and there was some truth in that--but she wasn't afraid of *him* being hurt so much as putting herself out there and having her heart crushed.

She was a coward. She kept herself safe behind a barricade of mistrust. She rationalized it with a lifetime of proof--everyone tried to use her, everyone wanted something from her--but that didn't change the fact she would never be able to love anyone if she couldn't get past her own issues.

An aching certainty lodged in her chest--the certainty that she would never be able to love anyone the way she loved Jay. Who was walking away from her. Steps away from disappearing from her life forever.

No.

\* \* \*

"That's it?"

Sasha's shout was aggressive. A challenge that stopped him in his tracks. A slow smile began to curve his mouth.

"You give a whole big speech and just march off into the sunset?"

He heard her footsteps rustling the grass behind him as she closed the distance he'd put between them. Her next words came from just behind his shoulder, but he didn't

turn. Not yet.

"Isn't that just like a man. I bet you think those love stories where somebody dies at the end and the other schmuck spends their entire life wallowing in grief are *romantic*, don't you?" A finger poked his shoulder. Hard. "Unending angst isn't romance, dumbass. It's a fucking cop-out."

Jay turned. Her expression was fierce and utterly beautiful—for the first time there was no reserve, no cool, protective shell wrapped around what she was feeling. His heart stuttered and he smiled, but it didn't change anything. He shot a pointed glance at the lightening eastern horizon. "I'm not trying to badger you into redeeming me, Sasha. I'll probably end up a smudge on God's thumb if I try. I have to go back."

After six months living as human, he'd finally figured out love wasn't about what you got, but what you gave, and he didn't have anything to give her.

"I guess I'm following you into Hell then."

"You're three-quarters human and you don't have a Champion's contract and an angelic sword protecting you anymore. You'd never survive it." He cupped her jaw, needing to feel the brush of her skin just one more time.

"I don't care. I'm coming with you."

"I knew there were some angelic tendencies in there somewhere. Martyrdom is a real favorite of theirs."

"Jay."

"Just wait for me. I'll be back."

"You don't have to go," she insisted. "There's so much good in you, you have to be able to survive it. It could work, the redemption thing. Couldn't it?" She fisted her hands on his belt-loops. "Because the thing is, I'm never gonna find another guy who'll argue with Lucifer and fight his way through an army of lesser demons for me. Let alone someone who sees good in me even I don't know is there." She swallowed nervously but her eyes never left his. "I love you, Jay."

*This must be how angels feel when they fly.* His heart took off, but his feet were still firmly grounded. "I love you too."

"Really?"

"Really. Sasha. Baby. Where else am I going to find a woman who will march into Hell itself for me?"

She smiled and he thought he could see a blush in the gathering dawn. She was so beautiful, so fiercely independent and confident, it was easy to miss the quiet insecurity she kept hidden.

He lowered his head, kissing her softly, a lingering promise. A kiss to tell her he would be back for her, no matter what it took. She answered him urgently, slipping her arms around his shoulders and holding on tight. "Please, Jay," she whispered against his lips. "Stay."

*It could work.* For the first time, Jay let himself consider the reality of it. Sasha brought out the best in him, noble qualities he didn't even know he had. The promise of redemption had always been a formless fantasy, but with

Sasha in his arms, it took on a new sense of possibility. He could stay, with her, and live a human life. A life rich with love and laughter and the amplified urgency of the mortal world. A life with Sasha.

"If an angel can love me," he said, hearing the faint stirrings of hope, "there might be something worth redeeming in me after all."

Sasha grunted, unimpressed with that logic. "I don't feel very angelic."

Jay cupped her face. "Trust me on this. I know an angel when I see one." He grinned. "Crankiness and misanthropic tendencies included."

"Do you really think it would work?"

"You're the best in me, Sasha. Why would He want to separate us?" Jay bent and brushed a tender kiss across her lips, then another. "Let me stay with you for the dawn. Let me love you, even if it is the last time." If he was smote to the lowest circle of Hell, he would climb out again. He had reason to now.

He kissed her again, lingering in the feel of her mouth. He barely heard her next words, spoken so softly against his lips.

"Don't go."

\* \* \*

Sasha must have been infected by some passionate insanity. She knew she should be sending him away, guarding against the chance that he would be banished to

a depth of Hell so far she would never see him again. But her arms refused to let him go and she couldn't stop kissing him. Each touch seemed more acute, sharp in the knowledge that it could be the last.

Ho-hum Clark Kent and his by rote foreplay were a distant memory. Jay *consumed* her. His mouth owning hers in a merciless possession. His hands stripped her of her weapons, tossing them on the ground at their feet and the more he took off, the warmer she got.

He was fire. His lips scored a path down her throat and his teeth dragged over the soft upper curve of her breast above her tank top. Sasha tested his muscles with her fingertips, firm and deliciously strong. She went breathless--but who needed oxygen anyway? Jay wrapped an arm around her ribs, lifting her just enough to set her off balance and wedging a thigh between hers so she was forced to cling to him, straddling him for stability. His hard thigh rubbed against the seam of her jeans and Sasha's head fell back with a low moan, as liquid warmth rushed through her core.

Sasha clung tight. She couldn't lose him. He thought she was the angel, but he was all the best parts of her. He had to be good enough. If he wasn't, she would go into Hell again to find him--no matter how deep and dark a place he was sent to. She was finally risking her heart. She'd given him every molecule of it and she wasn't going to lose him without a fight.

He stroked down her back and her nerve endings

thrummed like a strummed guitar. Every physical sensation echoed an emotional conversation. Adoration in the way his lips caressed her breast, possessiveness in the almost too tight grip of his hands on her hips, a promise of protection in the strength of his touch, and beneath it all the fear that at any moment it could be taken away.

Jay dropped to his knees and Sasha knelt as well before pulling him down with her to the ground. The coarse grass was rough against her shoulders, but she didn't care about the minor irritation. She needed his weight pressing her into the earth, the feel of him real and firm over her.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" she whispered, the words turned into breathless gasps. "Sinning while we're trying to have you redeemed?"

"I'm never a better man than when I'm with you. I think God will understand."

Jay returned to her mouth for a quick kiss that turned into an epic. His hair was silk between her fingers even as his were busy with the fastenings on her jeans. He worked the zipper open and she lifted her hips to help him drag her jeans down. There was a momentary awkward tangle and then they both broke away, quickly stripping out of their clothing.

The pile of their clothes didn't make much of a cushion on the hard ground, but Sasha wouldn't have traded it for a feather bed. She wanted to bask in the immediacy, the urgency of this moment, but when he slid high inside her, in a slow, toe-curling stroke, all that urgency receded. There



was no rush, just the lavish exploration of each minute feeling, each lingering touch.

They strained against one another, pushing toward a place beyond good and evil, a place where angels and demons and humans didn't exist, where the only thing that mattered was the twining of two souls.

*Almost there.* She gasped his name, a broken prayer.

They broke through together and Sasha shattered under the force of the shared climax, the sight of Jay's face above hers the only thing keeping her on the mortal plane at all.

His weight pressed her into the earth and every physical sensation was magnified a thousand times as the continuing shocks of her orgasm gradually quieted. Sasha wrapped her arms around his shoulders, holding on to the bone-deep pleasure as long as she could. Jay pressed his forehead to hers and whispered, "Thank you," but she wasn't sure whether he was thanking her or God for allowing them this last time together, for allowing them to find one another.

She would never know. The sun crested the horizon and the first light of day struck him.

His back arched, every muscle going rigid as his mouth opened in a silent scream.

Sasha held on as tightly as she could as the light pierced his skin, trying to pour every shred of goodness she'd ever possessed into him. *Please, don't take him. Please.* It was like holding a live firework, but she didn't loosen her hold. If there was any chance her arms could

hold him on the mortal plane, she would never let go. She squeezed her eyes shut against the blinding light, concentrating on the feel of him, wanting to memorize the exact texture of his skin.

Jay gave a low, rasping gasp--the only sound he'd made since the light touched him--and collapsed onto her. Sasha dared to open her eyes and found the light had faded.

And Jay was still there. In her arms.

A giddy high surged through her, but her first question was tentative. "It worked?"

He groaned, dragging himself up on to one elbow like his body suddenly weighed nine hundred pounds. "Not something I'd like to go through every day, but yeah, I think it worked."

"How do you feel?"

"Definitely different." He shifted, groaning again. "Pretty crappy, to be honest." He looked down at her, his eyes slowly widening as realization set in. "I think that'll pass." A slow smile spread across his face. "Hi."

Sasha felt an answering smile curve her lips, helpless to stop it even if she had wanted to. "Hi back."

"So--" he shifted again, settling himself in the cradle of her legs, "--looks like you're stuck with me."

Her cheeks were starting to ache, but Sasha couldn't stop smiling. "It would appear that way." She looped her arms lazily around his shoulders, linking her fingers behind his neck. The world blurred, but she wasn't crying. Tough girls didn't cry. Not even from uncontainable joy.

"You still want me now that I've lost all my sexy demonic powers?"

Sasha grinned wickedly, rolling her body sinuously beneath his. "I'm sure I'll find *some* use for this boring almost-human body of yours."

"Boring?" he growled, his shoulders looming over her. "I'll show you *boring*."

He tipped onto his back, rolling with her and Sasha gave a laugh that broke into a ragged sigh. "Show me Heaven, Jay."



## Chapter Thirteen

### Mistletoe Merry-Go-Round

Sasha ducked out onto the patio, hoping she'd cleared the door before her mother saw the direction of her escape. After a sleepless night shooting her way through Hell, Sasha didn't have the stamina for yet another conversation about how *delighted* her mother was that Jay wasn't deformed after all and wouldn't he make *lovely* grandbabies.

A strong arm slipped around her waist and she felt her tension melt away. Jay pulled her back against his chest, facing them both toward the landscaped perfection of her mother's Japanese garden. Sasha leaned back into him, enjoying the warmth of his body supporting hers.

"I think your great-aunt Margie has been hitting the eggnog. She just called Debbie Reynolds a talentless hack and is now doing a time step on top of a coffee table that probably costs more than your apartment."

Sasha snorted out a laugh. "She's still pissed about being passed over for the lead in *Singin' in the Rain*. You'll get to see an eighty-nine-year-old woman performing 'Dream of You' as a striptease by the end of the night if my mom can't wrestle her 'special Christmas punch' away from her."

"Is that what's in her flask? I might wrestle it away from her myself. I could use a shot or two."

"I wouldn't recommend it. Unless you like drinking hot pink lighter fluid. It's her special recipe, which translates as *mildly toxic*. Just don't pour it on the plants on the patio. My cousin Elaine tried that last year when it was her turn to cut Aunt Margie off. It decimated the hydrangeas and the landscaper quit in protest."

"Did you know your dad is taking bets on who will be the first to fall into the pool?"

"Mmm, good money's always on Aunt Margie, but don't discount the cousins. Eileen caught Evelyn with her boyfriend under the mistletoe two Christmases ago. There was much hair-pulling and screeching and we had to declare two winners for the Pool Pool that year because no one could tell which one of them hit the water first."

"Why did I want to be mortal again?"

Sasha twisted in his arms. "Because you're crazy about me." She went on tiptoe and popped a kiss on to his mouth. "And part of being crazy about me is putting up with my family's holiday rituals. Welcome to the human race."

She tucked her hands into the back pockets of his snug blue jeans and admired the way the soft red sweater hugged his shoulders.

"Just stay away from the mistletoe if you don't want to be molested by my female relatives. You look really hot in red."

From the look that crossed his face, her warning came too late. Jay started to reply and Sasha held up her hand to stop him.

"I feel I should warn you that all bitching about my family

for the next fifty years is going to be met with a reminder that your mother is literally *from Hell*."

He grinned. "Fifty years?"

Sasha shrugged. "Give or take. I saved your ass from eternal damnation. I figure you owe me a lifetime of devotion."

"That sounds fair. Just remember I did some saving of my own."

"For which you will be richly rewarded." Sasha wagged her eyebrows and grinned lecherously. "Just as soon as we get home tonight."

He bent his head, nuzzling her neck just below her ear. "Can I get a preview?"

"Maybe a thirty-second teaser." She leaned into the kiss, quickly forgetting her own thirty-second time limit.

"Sasha, there you are! Stop mauling that nice boy and come inside. Dinner's ready." Sasha and Jay broke apart guiltily as the sound of her mother's heels clacking loudly on the patio tiles retreated, an eerie echo of Jezebeth's kitten heels.

All day the strangest things had been reminding her of the Underworld. She'd probably never be able to enter her kitchen without remembering Jay being yanked into a vortex or having her grandfather announce she was going to Hell—but she didn't want to forget. She'd found herself in Hell. A version of herself that wasn't dependent on her mother's fame or anyone else's approval. Somewhere in the depths of Hell, she'd stopped seeing herself as

someone who didn't quite fit the role she'd been cast. No longer the reluctant good girl. No more secret snark.

Sasha couldn't regret a single second of it.

Her silver charm bracelet caught on Jay's sweater as she obediently removed her hands from his person. The small, silver-wrapped package holding it had been perched on her cutting board that morning. There'd been no card, but the swirl on the paper was the exact shape the markings on the Desert Eagles had been.

It was delicate, each charm beautifully crafted. An angel-complete with halo--a gun, the linked drama and comedy masks, a film reel and a tiny pitchfork. Now, as she untangled her wrist from Jay's sweater, the pitchfork tangled in the angel's halo and she smiled.

Sasha tucked her hand into Jay's as they started slowly back toward the holiday chaos inside. "My family adores you."

"They don't know I'm a demon yet."

"Former demon. I thought I'd save that little bombshell for the next holiday gathering. Easter maybe."

"Sasha."

She made a face at the reproach in his voice. "We'll tell them. When the time is right we'll tell them about your lineage and me going into Hell--though I might skim some of the details there. But I have to tell them soon. My mother in particular deserves to know the truth about her very own guardian angel."

"He's your guardian angel too."



"What would I need a guardian angel for?" She grinned up at him. "I've got my very own guardian devil."

They stepped through the doorway into the dining room and paused to take in the feast that made the tables groan under its weight. Her mother's chef had outdone himself.

"Sasha! Jay!" Layla Christian bounced on the balls of her feet and clapped her hands excitedly. "You're under the mistletoe!"

*This from the woman who demanded I stop mauling him.* Sasha rolled her eyes, leaned up and pecked Jay somewhere in the vicinity of his jaw, hoping that would be the end of it.

"Oh, please! That isn't a kiss," Great-Aunt Margie barked. "I'll show you a kiss."

As she bore down on them with a distinctly unwholesome gleam in her eye, Jay quickly pulled Sasha against his chest and bent her over his arm. Sasha gasped softly and his mouth came down to rest over her parted lips. "Save me," he whispered.

When he put it like that...*What the hell?* She'd blame it on the mistletoe.



## About the Author

Vivi Andrews was born and raised in Alaska, and she still lives in the Last Frontier when she isn't bouncing around the globe. After graduating from Northwestern University, Vivi tested out a variety of careers--from the movie industry to accounting--but kept coming back to her first two loves, writing and travel. She lived in nine cities--on two continents and one tropical island--while pursuing her dream of writing romance professionally.

In 2009, Vivi won the Golden Heart Award, presented by the Romance Writers of America, and her debut novella, "*The Ghost Shrink, the Accidental Gigolo & the Poltergeist Accountant*," hit the digital shelves. Within two years, she wrote and released eight paranormal romances, including the bestselling Serengeti Shifter series and critically-lauded Karmic Consultants books.

Vivi is currently hard at work on her next happily-ever-after. For more about her books or the life of a nomadic romance author, please visit her blog, *Ramblings from the Road*, at <http://viviandrews.blogspot.com> or stop by her website at [www.viviandrews.com/](http://www.viviandrews.com/).





**Freeze Line**  
**By Moira Rogers**

**She can't survive in his world; he can't stay sane in hers**

A twenty-first century ice age dulls the magic that emanates from the earth. Shane Sullivan is a lone wolf above the freeze line. He has no desire to join the packs that range closer to the border, where feral instincts can turn a man into a monster. Not until the winter solstice, when he stumbles across a dying witch who needs his help to get back to her people--and her magic--in the south.

Nadia is a powerful woman in her own world, but she's been drained by her escape from captivity in a northern lab. She knows it's foolhardy to trust a werewolf, but he's her only chance to survive the vast white wilderness. The farther south they travel, the harder it is for Shane to keep the beast within under control, and as their mutual attraction intensifies, Nadia's no longer sure she wants him to.



## Chapter One

Winter hit hard above the freeze line, and it lasted forever. Most of the time, Shane liked it that way. Fewer opportunities for visitors, fewer supply runs into Hamilton.

Fewer reasons to be sociable.

He throttled down, but the trail had already been packed hard with snow. Braking was tricky, and the snowmobile lurched sideways a few inches before he managed to carefully correct the slide. He had to remember to make his runs in the morning, before Bobby Settles ran through with his massive truck and a load of greenhouse produce.

*You're cranky, Sullivan.* Odd. Usually the colder weather lifted his spirits. Sure, he was stuck indoors most of the time, but at least the fevers faded, sapped away by the frozen earth along with the rest of the magic. He was free from them for months--no sleepless nights shredded by fitful dreams of running under the moon, howling with the others of his kind.

In the winter, the magic slept, and the glittering, barren world was a relief to him in a way his human neighbors would never understand.

He crested a hill, the last before the straight shot across Gilroy Lake and the border of his property, and spotted a dark figure ahead, beside the trail.

He'd gone to town in the first place because an ugly sky and a biting wind from the north heralded a storm, the kind

that could shut him in his house for weeks. None of his neighbors were foolish enough to wander around in such weather alone unless they had no choice.

Shane slowed as he neared the figure, but a frown drew his brows together. A slight figure, in gear too light for the weather. *Lost.*

He stopped the snowmobile. "You need some help?"

The figure turned. Slow and unsteady, boots slipping on the packed snow. A pale feminine face peered from beneath the hood of a too-big parka. Her words came out breathless and choppy as she shivered so hard her teeth chattered. "I was looking for shelter?"

"Not from around here, I guess." He jerked one thumb over his shoulder. "Nearest town's that way."

She blinked as if she was having trouble parsing the words, and her gaze shifted too slowly to follow the path of his hand. "Oh. You're not going in that direction?"

She was already disoriented. If he left her walking, she'd become even more confused, would probably sit down and freeze to death. "Where's your ride?"

"I don't have one." She wrapped her arms around her body, looking tired and lost. "I'm...I'm not from around here."

*No shit.* "Why don't you climb on? My place is just across the lake. You can warm up, maybe make some calls."

She didn't move at once. Wariness stirred in her eyes, the first real emotion she'd displayed, and even with his senses dulled, he heard the too-fast pounding of her heart.



Fear.

Finally, she looked away. "I'm a witch."

He hadn't felt the pull of her magic, but that didn't surprise him. This far north, she might as well be human. "Dead of winter above the freeze line, lady. I'm not scared of you. Are you scared of me?"

At least she didn't lie. "Yes. Right now, I'm scared of everyone."

It didn't matter what--or who--she was afraid of. Fear spelled trouble. "You coming or not?"

Her foot slipped once as she stepped forward. She caught her balance, then picked a cautious, uncertain path to his side. She dropped one gloved hand to his shoulder and swung her leg awkwardly over the snowmobile, then huddled close against his back. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now hold on."

Once he'd navigated the sloping bank and driven onto the ice, Shane urged the snowmobile to a faster speed. Most of his bulk would shield the woman behind him from the biting wind, but past a certain point, cold was cold. And she needed to warm up.

Soon his house came into view, and he closed the remaining distance quickly. When he killed the engine and slid off the snowmobile, the woman almost fell over into the snow. "You still with me?"

Her lips were turning an alarming shade of blue. She braced both hands on the seat of the snowmobile and nodded jerkily. "I need a moment."

She wouldn't make it into the house on her own. "Come on." He lifted her in his arms, careful not to jar her, and trudged to the door.

He sat her on the couch, stripped off her ill-fitting parka and wrapped two thick blankets over her shoulders. "Coffee or tea?" he asked as he stalked to the thermostat to crank it higher.

"Tea, please." Her sleepy gaze followed him as she pulled the blankets more snugly around her. "If you have any food to spare--my body is consuming itself."

He'd just as soon that didn't happen in his living room. "Graham crackers?" She would need the extra sugar to help get warm.

"Anything. Thank you..." She frowned. "I don't know your name."

"Shane Sullivan." He set the kettle on the stove and peeled off his cold-weather wear. "Are your clothes damp?"

"Yes, a little. I wasn't here of my--" Her teeth snapped together. "I did not have the opportunity to plan for travel."

There wasn't much to say to that. "You have to take them off."

"All right." No embarrassment or self-consciousness, though she might well be far past both. She let the blankets slip from her shoulders. The clothes seemed as ill fitting as the parka had been. A man's rough cotton shirt hung around her like a tent, but the pants were tight across her hips.

She struggled with the boots first, her clumsy fingers

fumbling with laces still caked with ice. Conscience pricked him. It had been too long since he'd had to deal with other people in this capacity, and he was horrible at it.

So Shane put the crackers on the coffee table and knelt by her feet. "Let me."

"I'm sorry." Her voice sounded hoarse. "I'm worse than helpless. It's so *cold*, and the earth is completely asleep. I've never felt anything like it."

The utter lack of magic--and her resulting weakness--must have terrified her. "It doesn't really wake up around here, not even in the summer."

Huge brown eyes studied him for a moment, and he had the curious sensation she was weighing something about him. She tilted her head to one side. "Are you a werewolf?"

The only logical deduction. "Yeah."

"Oh." Silence reigned as he slipped off her boots, leaving her scrunching her toes in oversize cotton socks. Finally, she sighed. "I'm not sure if I'm being hunted or not."

He was in it now, no matter what. "Don't worry about it." He peeled off the socks too and stood, gesturing to her. "If you can handle the rest, I'll be in the kitchen."

A nod. "I believe so, yes."

He retreated to check on the kettle--and take a moment to peer out the kitchen window at the path to the house. If she'd been followed...Shane shook himself. He'd seen no one else, not even a hint of a search, and he forced himself to relax.

When he returned, her clothes lay in a pile beside her

boots. The witch had curled up with the blankets tangled around her body, her legs tucked under her, her cheek resting on the arm of the couch. Almost asleep.

"Hey--" He hadn't even caught her name. "Hey, lady, sit up. You can't sleep yet. You need to eat and drink something." *And warm up.*

She moaned, but she sat up anyway. The blanket slipped from one shoulder, revealing milky skin and the winding pattern of a tattoo curled around her upper right arm. "Nadia. I'm Nadia."

"Nadia." He snatched another throw from the back of a chair and laid it over her shoulders. "Tea's almost ready."

"Thank you...Shane?"

"That's right." The kettle began to whistle, so he went to prepare her tea and added several spoonfuls of sugar. When he carried it back, he found her more alert, and some of his tension eased. "Here you go."

With the warm mug clutched between her hands, she perked up. "Do you live alone?"

"Just me."

"So far from everyone else?"

She already knew the truth, so what did a little more matter? "It's safer that way, especially when things warm up."

"Ah." Understanding sparked in her eyes as she took a careful sip of her tea. "You seem more at peace than the werewolves I've encountered before."

Which meant she hadn't spent much time north of the

line--and she didn't know jack shit about him. "Living up here dulls the feral stuff just like it does your magic."

"Yes." She closed her eyes. "The people who brought me here counted on it."

She'd been hurt. Shane choked back the instinctive anger that rose, and pressed the crackers into her hand. "Eat."

After one bite, she made a quiet sound of pleasure, as if she hadn't tasted anything better in days--which was entirely possible, judging by her enthusiasm. She drank half the tea and ate three crackers in silence as her shivering eased. "You saved my life."

Something about the declaration left him uneasy. "Maybe."

"You did." She sipped her tea. Studied him. "I have nothing with which to repay you."

He bristled. "I don't need to be repaid for decency."

The words made her flinch. "I mean no insult. It is my people's custom."

"What, insinuating that I must have dragged you back here for a reason, or that you've got to make it worth my while? That custom sucks."

Her lips tugged down into a frown. "It is not about your expectations. It is about my gratitude."

"You can keep it."

"Then I will." At least the anger flashing in her eyes proved there was some life in her.

Not to mention the fact that her ire bothered him less

than the helpless, almost hopeless way she'd tallied what she supposedly owed him. "Look--you don't owe me anything. Jackasses aside, anyone around here would have done the same thing. People help each other."

The words startled a laugh out of her. "Are we people?"

Maybe not, but he'd spent so long pretending that he didn't like the question. "Sure, why not?"

She lifted one shoulder, though the gesture was all but obscured by the heavy tangle of blankets. "I am what I am. And what I am is very tired. Do you think it's safe for me to sleep?"

She seemed alert enough now, exhaustion aside. "Do you hurt anywhere?"

"There's one place." Nadia hesitated. "It's not related to the cold. It's the back of my neck. I think there may be burns."

The anger he'd choked down threatened to boil up and spill over. "Let me see."

One slender hand slid from beneath the blankets. She turned, reached up and dragged the disheveled strands of her long, dark hair forward over one shoulder.

Angry red marks stood out on the back of her neck, and up close he could see faint bruises circling her throat. "It was a collar," she whispered. "It shocked me."

Shane breathed in, one long inhalation, and out. "I have an antibiotic cream, if you think it'll help."

"I don't think it can hurt. My body might not have the energy to fight off infection. Not with the earth dragging at

me."

"I'll get it." He made his way to the bathroom and braced his hands on the sink as he fought for control. Even the dormant earth couldn't erase every trace of the wolf from his body or mind, and the sick, injured woman in his living room brought the beast rushing to the surface.

Blankets and bandages couldn't appease instinct. She was weak, she'd been hurt and the wolf wanted to make someone pay.





## Chapter Two

Nadia woke slowly.

For a few moments, the relief of waking at all overrode every other concern. The terrifying weeks since her betrayal had become a blur of fear and rage, both wreathed in the miserable pull of the earth. Even now she could feel it drawing magic from her, one drop at a time, like grains of sand trying to fill an ocean.

The ocean would never be full. She, on the other hand, had only so much to give.

Nadia looked around as she sat up. Her rescuer had guided her to a bedroom and a bed piled high with blankets, though otherwise sparsely furnished. Everything about the room was neat and coolly impersonal, with the exception of the books stacked along handmade bookshelves and piled on every available surface.

An unexpected discovery in the den of a werewolf. The wolves she'd encountered had been more monster than man, questionably literate and sometimes barely verbal. Rumor painted them as snarling, growling creatures that dragged the unwary back to their dens to satisfy their obscene sexual cravings.

Propaganda, perhaps. After all, hadn't the humans who'd taken her asked insulting questions? Their demands echoed in her ears, frightened voices crawling with sick excitement, urging her to confess to participation in

licentious rites where humans were sacrificed to dark gods.

A fair reminder she shouldn't be so quick to judge.

Beyond the stacks of books sat a chair with a neatly folded pair of sweatpants and a fluffy sweatshirt. Hoping he'd intended them for her, Nadia slipped from the bed on unsteady legs and tightened the drawstring around her waist until the baggy pants weren't in danger of slipping off her hips. The sweatshirt was huge too, the gray fabric hanging to her knees and the sleeves falling past her fingertips.

Size didn't matter. The clothes were warm and clean and blessedly dry. Even better, they held no memories. No lingering power laced with the memory of violence. She'd just as soon never see the clothes she'd been wearing again, not when they carried traces of the scientist she'd taken them from.

Not a thought to dwell on. Her escape was behind her now, with only the exhaustion that came from using too much power to remind her of how close to death she'd come. With any luck, the scientists would assume she'd perished in the storm. If they didn't...

Well, she'd deal with that eventuality when it presented itself. And she'd deal better with food in her belly and a plan for making her way back to the border.

She found Shane in the living room, his socked feet propped on the low table and a steaming mug beside him. "Want some coffee?"

"Yes, please." With death no longer an imminent threat,

she could admire the way he looked, the handsome lines of his body. His dark hair was cut short, and he had a neatly trimmed beard that her fingers itched to stroke. Her tribe considered a clean jaw the sign of a civilized man, but she found Shane's appearance oddly compelling.

"Sit." He disappeared into the kitchen, though he poked his head out a moment later. "Do you take anything in yours? Sugar, maybe?"

"Sugar, yes." She sank onto the couch and smiled. "I have a weakness for sweets."

"I'll keep that in mind." He came back with a mug and a small plate of cookies. "Feeling better? No ill effects?"

"Hungry and tired." As hungry as she was, it took all her self-control to reach for just a single cookie and take a modest bite. "I've lost track of the days, but it must be close to the solstice now."

"Tomorrow," he told her, rubbing his hands on his pants. "I was about to start dinner. Want to help?"

"Of course." No wonder her body felt like it was weighted down. Drowning. The height of winter and she was trapped in the frozen north. It was a miracle she was still alive at all.

She picked up a second cookie as she rose, and then joined him in his compact kitchen.

Shane began to gather ingredients, and he handed her a head of lettuce and a knife. A cutting board had already been placed on the counter by the sink. "If you're steady enough, you can start the salad."

It was an oddly domestic scene, and it brought to light an embarrassing deficiency in her training. "I have never had to spend much time cooking. I can't ruin this if I cut it wrong, can I?"

"No, not at all. Here." He took the lettuce and washed it in the sink, then motioned for her to stand back. "You have to take out the core, like this." One quick slam on the cutting board and he wriggled free what looked like a stem from the middle of the vegetable. "Now you can just cut it."

At least she felt comfortable with the knife. The crisp, clean smell of fresh lettuce made her stomach rumble as she washed her hands and began. "How do you have lettuce this deep into winter? I have always been told fresh food is hard to come by above the freeze line."

"A local farmer has a couple of greenhouses. If we help with maintenance and solar power, we get year-round fruits and vegetables for reasonable prices."

Another rumor disproved. "Most of the Nine Tribes have magical nurseries. But it can take dozens of our strongest witches to keep them alive this time of year."

"It helps when people work together," was all he said as he set a large pan on the stovetop with a clatter.

He was comfortable in the kitchen, though she supposed he'd have to be if he lived mostly on his own. "What are you cooking?"

"Chicken. I put it in to marinate while you slept. Is that okay?"

"It sounds perfect."

And it *was* perfect. Nadia didn't think it was simple hunger that made it the best meal she'd had in her life, though perhaps part of her enjoyment came from helping to prepare it. Shane seemed more relaxed while she was on her feet, assisting him, as if her infirmity had put his temper on edge.

A pity, then, that not even the food would help for long. She'd slept through much of the afternoon, but night had fallen now, and she could feel the temperature plummeting.

Shane frowned. "Your lips are blue."

"I'm cold," she admitted. They'd settled in the living room again, with a blanket curled around her, and still she couldn't stop shivering. "Even where I'm from, the winter solstice is not always a pleasant time. It's when we're at our most vulnerable." In fact, few adults passed the night alone. All rules of status and social standing could be overlooked on the one night when everyone needed a warm body to curl up with.

Her host must have come to the same conclusion. "You can't sleep alone. If you're continuing to have problems keeping warm, your condition could be more severe than I thought."

She craved the warmth in him as much as she might have craved his body if she weren't so exhausted. "I need to go south. Soon. If you feed me and keep me warm, I might get stronger...to a point. But nothing will make me better except finding a place where the earth isn't frozen."

He leaned forward in his chair. "Will you be well enough

to travel that far?"

If only she knew. "Perhaps. If I can make it past the solstice. If I can get *warm*."

Shane stripped off his shirt, revealing a hard, muscled chest with a light dusting of hair. "You couldn't go alone."

"I could--" She swallowed. "If someone were willing to act as a guide, I could offer compensation once I made it to the border."

"You don't have a choice, do you?" He knelt on the sofa and peeled the blanket away from her shoulders, then lifted the sweatshirt over her head. "You have to go."

Casual words and his movements were gently impersonal, so much so that he'd bundled her into his lap and wrapped the blanket around them both before she could phrase a response.

Not that she wanted to. His skin was so hot it burned, either a side effect of his werewolf heritage or a sign of how chilled she'd become. Nadia closed her eyes and let out a soft sigh, warm for the first time in longer than she could remember. "This is nice."

"You don't feel that cold." His voice was edged with worry.

Because the cold was coming from inside, an echo of the frozen ground beneath them. "Witches don't last long in the cold. Whether I can find a guide or not, I'll have to start south after the solstice. It's my only chance."

"What will you do? You're not outfitted for this kind of weather, even if you *were* in good shape, and you don't

have transportation."

She'd do what she had to do, no matter the price. "I suppose I'll hope your kindness extends to letting me stay here until then and taking me to the nearest settlement."

His breath blew hot on her shoulder, though his words were chilling. "They won't help you."

Nadia had survived betrayal. She'd survived experiments that bordered on torture, being caged and spit upon, being considered less than an animal by her captors. She'd survived the escape. She'd survived the cold that had turned her bones to ice.

She would survive this too. She *would*.

And she wouldn't cry, even if helpless despair formed a knot in her throat so painful she couldn't swallow around it. "I'm not so proud that I won't beg. You, them--everyone. Maybe they'll laugh at me, but I can't not try. I can't lie down and die."

"They won't laugh either." His voice dropped to a whisper. "They'll find out where you escaped from, and they'll send you back. But I can help you."

Nadia closed her eyes to keep tears from slipping free. "I would be very--" She choked on the word, afraid to utter it when her gratitude had so offended him before.

"I know." A deep sigh pressed his chest to her back. "I can't take you all the way to the border. A werewolf that far south is asking for trouble."

"You wouldn't have to," she promised. "If I could even get within a hundred miles of the border, it would stop killing

me. I wouldn't be strong, but I wouldn't be dying anymore."

"I could do that," Shane told her. "I need to get the snow chains on my truck, pack up for a trip. We could leave tomorrow, if everything went well."

She thought about the core of ice inside her and how much worse it might be tomorrow, whether the temperature dropped or not. The energies in the earth were spiraling into darkness. Tomorrow afternoon they'd be at their stillest, and she'd be a shadow, dependent on whatever warmth he could give her.

It was hard to ask, if only because it bared the depth of her helplessness. "Maybe the next day? Tomorrow will be hard on me. But the next day starts the new cycle."

"Either one, it's no different to me."

Nadia shifted just enough to tuck her forehead against his neck, closed her eyes and let the tension in her body slowly unravel. "There are human traders who cross the border. When I arrive home, I'll send one to you with payment. I hope you'll accept it."

A noise that could have been agreement or denial rumbled in his chest. "We'll see."

With that, she'd have to be content. Nadia smiled and folded one hand under her chin. His skin was warm against her fingers, smooth for all that it was stretched over hard muscle. She liked the scratch of hair, the wild scent of him. Not one of her kind, but not human either.

This far from home, otherness was the safest bond she could have. With his warmth seeping into her and that feral



*other* tickling along the dull, icy edges of her senses, she drifted into the quiet peace of sleep.

\* \* \*

Shane placed the last box into the bed of the truck and closed the tailgate. With only two days to prepare, he'd packed way too much, but he had to plan for everything--including the possibility they might find themselves up against bad weather and stranded for several days until conditions improved.

He studied the assortment of boxes and packs. There was no room left to spread out sleeping bags, but they could always shift supplies into the cab of the truck to free up space. One last look and he carefully lowered the insulated glass window of the camper shell and locked it.

A tarp-covered heap in the corner of the garage drew his attention, and he swallowed hard. He'd always meant to go through those boxes, didn't even know why he'd brought them here, but it had been easier to put off going through them for another time.

No time now, but perhaps he could do something better. Shane shoved aside the dusty tarp and hauled the boxes, two by two, into the spare bedroom just inside the house. "Nadia?"

A few moments later she appeared in the doorway, busily plaiting her long, dark hair. She looked better today, with color in her cheeks and clarity in her eyes. She tied off

the end of her braid and flicked it over her shoulder as she gave the boxes a curious look. "Supplies?"

"Clothes." He had no idea what he'd say if she pressed him for an explanation. "I don't know how much of it will fit, but you should look through them."

"Oh." A tiny furrow appeared between her eyebrows as she sank to her knees and opened one box. "Are you sure you don't mind me using them?"

Shane looked away and back again. "They've just been sitting out in the garage."

She pulled out a faded T-shirt and held it up. "I may be able to wear some of it. Thank you."

Pink cotton, the yellow silk-screened logo cracked and flaking off in places. One of Cilla's favorites. "You're welcome."

"Is there anything else you need me to do before we leave?" She folded the shirt and set it aside, her hands gentle.

He still had to plot out the best route. "Where do you need to go, exactly?"

"The quickest way south, or to anyplace where the ground is thawed. Honestly, I barely know where I am."

A frisson of impatience made him grunt. "No, where do you *know* people? Tell me where you'll go after you get to safety."

"The Baja territories." Her gaze stayed riveted to the clothes. "I'll probably stay at the border for a time. One of my tribe sold me to the scientists who brought me north. I

need to be strong before I go back there to face them."

It wouldn't take nearly as long as having to cut far east as well as south. "That shouldn't be hard. I know a border town where you should do all right."

Nadia looked up and smiled. "That would be perfect, Shane."

"Yeah." That smile scraped his nerves, tightened his chest to aching. "You deserve a chance."

"Now I'll have one." Amusement flashed through her eyes as she turned her attention back to the clothing. "I know it might be hard to believe, looking at me now, but I'm actually considered a respectable warrior among my people."

He knew better than to judge anyone by appearances. "Really?"

"When I don't wobble every time I try to stand." She pulled open a second box and began to sort through the neatly folded winter gear. "How soon will you be ready to leave?"

"After lunch, if you're up to it."

"As long as you don't expect me to drive."

As jokes went, it was stilted and awkward. Shane smiled anyway. "Not in *my* truck."

She laughed, a warm, soft sound that seemed to almost surprise her. "I see some things are universal."

"Yeah." He needed to get away from her, from her laughter and the boxes of his dead girlfriend's clothes.

"After lunch, okay?"

A solemn nod. Her eyes were as gentle as her smile. "I'll be ready."



## Chapter Three

Shane crested a hill, then downshifted and slowed as a mountain of snow appeared in the road ahead. "Could be a stalled car, maybe even fallen trees," he told her. "We'll have to go off-road."

"All right." His truck seemed more than capable of handling the rough terrain, which was nothing short of a miracle to Nadia. Some tribes embraced technology and fought to restore and improve upon the luxuries that had been available before the endless winter, but her enclave was dominated by traditionalists who valued magic over machine.

The first two hours of the drive had been nerve-racking, but Shane had politely ignored the way she clutched the seat, and she'd gradually grown accustomed to the rumble of the engine and their slow but steady pace. "Your vehicle is very efficient. And your house was comfortable. I was always led to believe humans struggled to survive this far north."

The safety belt tightened around her as the truck dipped off the shoulder, but Shane remained calm. Confident. "There are some places where it's like that, but small settlements like Hamilton are simple. If everyone does his part, everyone has enough."

It sounded almost peaceful, especially compared to the tempestuous life she'd left behind. "It's like that in the south

too. After the quakes started, many of us came together. The tribes--they didn't really exist before then. Not before the elders brought us out of hiding."

"I've heard the stories."

The stories rarely painted her people in a good light. "Do you believe we're to blame?"

Shane shrugged one shoulder. "Does it matter? The earth shifted, things changed. It doesn't matter to me *why*. We have to live with it either way."

If she touched the back of her neck, she'd feel the tender spot where the collar they'd fixed there had shocked her. Fear had driven them to it, the certainty she would use her magic to destroy them, because that was what witches did. "I don't think it should matter. But it does, to some people."

"Yes, it does." The truck lurched again and evened out, the engine rumbling as Shane pressed the accelerator.

He fell silent, and Nadia bit her lip against the urge to pick a new topic, to press conversation in order to hide her nerves. Instead she turned to look out the window, at the endless leagues of pure white snow. Even bundled in layers and snug in the relative warmth of the truck's cab, the sight made her shiver.

Or maybe it was the chill that lingered inside her. The day of the solstice had passed in a blur, her only clear memory the warmth of Shane's body curled around hers. That sensation had followed her into fitful dreams, where she was strong and alive and he liked the way she touched his skin, the way she kissed him and curled close.

Not something to ponder closely, not when they'd be squeezing into the tiny camper tonight, in quarters too close for her own good. Nadia cleared her throat and fixed her gaze on the trees to their right, a line of young pines that formed a bright splash of green on the unending white of the horizon. "You said you know of some hot springs on our path south?"

"There's a whole system of them down near the river." At her blank look, he said, "The Payette River, around Grandjean."

Her knowledge of geography was sadly limited to her own territory. "How long would it take to reach them? If it's not out of the way...Well, visiting them may not help me, but it can't hurt."

"Depends on the roads. We might reach them in time to stop for the night."

"All right." She'd never tried to pull energy from the earth so close to a volcanic zone. The heat of the magma might keep the earth from freezing, but the power would likely be different. Perhaps dangerous.

But no more dangerous than the weakness that made her beyond helpless.

Shane glanced at her. "What's wrong?"

Dulled by the cold or not, his senses were werewolf sharp. "There are places where magic runs peacefully. A hot spring strong enough to survive in this climate? It's not peaceful. It's wild."

His hands tightened on the wheel. "I can keep it under



control. You don't have to be scared."

"Keep wh--" Her teeth snapped together, and she cursed herself as a fool. "No. No, that's not it, Shane. It's *me*. I'm a reflection of the earth beneath my feet every bit as much as you are. It's worth the risk for one night, but I wouldn't want to linger. I can't promise I'll be entirely myself if all the power inside me comes from volcanic earth."

Some of his tension eased, but not much. "We'll both have to be careful."

"I won't hurt you," she whispered, "and it will fade quickly. But it will give me the strength to last to the border, I hope."

He reached out and patted her hand awkwardly. "We'll be fine."

The gesture was earnest enough to curve her lips in a smile she hid by turning her head again. As gruff as he could be, gentleness shone through in the way he handled her, the way he offered comfort to a relative stranger. Regardless of his protestations, she knew that made him unusual.

Shane Sullivan was an exceptional man, whether he believed it or not. Perhaps she could find a way to make him believe it before they parted ways. Nothing so tangible as monetary payment, but maybe just as valuable.

\* \* \*

The springs south of Twin Falls had always been there, or so the old-timers in Hamilton had told Shane.

At one point, when such places were uncommon in other parts of the States, those springs had drawn tourists to southern Idaho. Back then, there had been several hundred springs in the state. Less than half had bubbled up at low enough temperatures not to boil a person's flesh clean off.

Now, there were three times as many hot springs, and it was the rare one that could scald, much less kill. But the areas around the springs felt different. Not warmer, not exactly--a quick glance at a thermometer would disprove that--but *stronger*.

Different.

Shane threw his cooling coffee on the ground. It hissed and soaked down, staining the snow. "You want more before I kill the fire?"

"Mmm." Not quite an answer, but Nadia barely seemed able to focus on him this morning. She sat on the tailgate of the truck with her eyes closed.

Her skin was flushed, even in the cold, and there had been times during the night when her body had trembled against his. Whatever magic dwelled here in the hot earth, Nadia could feel it.

So could he.

She wet her lips, and her eyes drifted open, revealing endless pupils enclosed by a narrow brown ring. Her shallow, too-quick breaths and the unsteady thump of her heart erased any innocence in her sleepy, curious gaze.

Fever washed over him in a wave of heat, and he knew he had to lock it down. *Now*. "Nadia."

The tip of her tongue dragged over her full lower lip again, and her gaze fixed on his throat. "I think I'm ready to leave."

She'd have to be, whether she liked it or not. "We've got a lot of miles to cover."

Nadia closed her eyes and slipped from the tailgate with a grace he hadn't seen in her before. "I'm feeling much better...but not very like myself."

"Everything's waking up."

"Yes, it is." She stretched, arching up on her toes with her head thrown back, the early-morning sun bright on her face in spite of the biting cold. "I know I should conserve my energy. I'll need it to survive before we reach the border. But I'm so full. I want to *do* something."

She was lovely like this, free and primal, almost wild. "Like what?"

Laughter filled the space between them, warm and low, the sound its own caress. "I could show you fireworks."

It sounded too much like an invitation, especially with the fever simmering in his blood. "Fireworks?"

Nadia brought her hands together in front of her. A whispered word and the currents around them began to spin in a wide, lazy arc, as if she was drawing the earth into her. A dazzling light kindled above her palms, a flame that twisted into a perfect sphere, refracting hundreds of colors.

It hung, suspended above her mittens, and her sudden smile was brilliant. "Sometimes, at home, I throw these into the air for the children. They're so beautiful when they

explode."

Shane found himself laughing, charmed as much by her smile as by the disarmingly frivolous display of power. "I thought you said you were a warrior."

Her smile faded. "If I threw this into a person, it would explode then too. And it wouldn't be beautiful at all."

A harsh reminder, one he shouldn't have needed. Shane poured another cup of coffee and held it out. "We've got to get moving."

She whispered another word and snapped her hands together. When they parted, there was no trace of magic. "Thank you," she said quietly, accepting the cup. It looked awkward, cradled between hands encased in oversize mittens, but she just turned and started toward the front of the truck.

He'd upset her. He should have gone to her, tried to explain that it wasn't *her* he was afraid of so much as himself.

Instead he tossed the rest of the coffee, rinsed the pot and stowed their supplies in the back of the truck. The fire had died to embers, and Shane piled snow on top. He watched as it melted and hissed, then shoveled the remains around until nothing warm was left.

\* \* \*

They passed a small town close to the border, but Shane didn't dare stop. Newcomers were rarely welcomed, and

plenty of their supplies remained. Later, he might have to risk it, but for now...

Nadia stared out the window. Shane touched her shoulder. "Tell me more about the Nine Tribes. Where you're from."

She stirred slowly. The farther they'd traveled from the hot springs, the more subdued she'd become. Not ill or weak like she'd been before, but quieter. Even her voice seemed soft, hardly more than a whisper. "Each of the tribes is different. I was born near the sea. The elders call it the Gulf of California."

He'd never heard of it, though he recognized the name. California, from the time before. "Do the tribes get along?"

"Some of them. Sometimes. My tribe has been at war with the Fifth since I was a little girl." Her gaze fell to the bright mittens covering her hands. A coffee stain showed from where she'd spilled earlier. "We were trading partners before that, but they've begun to use technology again. They think our magic is sacred and should be saved for important things, not used to power vehicles or bring in the harvest. So we fight."

It sounded reasonable, though he could see both sides of the argument. "Guess they can't just move north and integrate with the humans." Even if people would welcome them, it would be as dangerous for any witch as this trip had been for Nadia.

"No." Her head turned, and out of the corner of his eye, he caught her studying him. "No more than werewolves can

live in the south."

"Right." He'd grown so used to pretending that wasn't him, who he was, that hearing her say it still jarred him.

"Some things can't be helped, I guess."

"How did you become--" The words cut off, and she blushed. "I'm sorry. My mentor used to tell me they always knew I was destined to become a warrior. I have the subtlety of a rockslide."

"I don't really want to talk about it, if that's okay."

"Of course." She turned to stare out the window again.

"I'm not the first soldier in my family," she said, the words a clear--if clumsy--attempt to change the subject. "I'm the fourth generation to specialize in battle magic. My great-grandmother was there when the quakes started. She died saving hundreds of humans during the first wave of evacuations from Yellowstone."

It sounded like the kind of story people would tell over drinks or maybe a campfire, tales of long-dead heroes bound to them by lineage and blood. "What was her name?"

"Allison." Nadia's voice softened. "My grandmother was just a little girl. She lost both of her parents before it was over, and was raised as a ward of the Second Tribe."

"So that's you? Second Tribe?"

"Yes."

But her voice had wavered. "You don't sound so sure."

"My sister..." She swallowed. "I have a sister. She's younger than I am, only twenty-two this year. She wasn't a

fighter, but she fell in love with one. A prisoner of war, from the Fifth Tribe."

Shane gripped the wheel. "You don't have to tell me."

"It's not a secret. Not among my people." Pain shredded her voice. "I could have gone with her and kept her safe. But I stayed and tried to prove I was loyal. I dedicated my life to my tribe, and I don't know if I have a home to go back to. I don't know if I was betrayed or just...eliminated."

Anger flooded him in an instinctive rush. "That's not right." Not right at all--and no different than what might happen to him in Hamilton if the townspeople found out he was a werewolf.

"No, it's not right." She crossed her arms over her body in a protective gesture. "When I asked you to bring me to the border, I'd thought I might look for my sister instead. I left so much behind, but I don't know if going back is worth the risk. If the elders approved of my elimination, they'll simply kill me. They would have expected it to happen by now, in any case. The scientists knew they would have a few months, at most, before I died."

"Do you have any idea where she might have settled?"

Nadia's sudden laugh was pained. "No. I'm not a very good older sister, am I?"

It was damn hard to find someone in the borderland when they weren't on the run from anything or anyone. "There are some people I can ask. Old friends."

She drew in a deep breath like she was trying to regain control. "I appreciate the offer, but I know you'll be

uncomfortable trying to stay on the border. You're doing plenty."

"Won't take long." And now he had to explain. "I grew up near the border."

"Oh. I see."

Did she? "My dad grew up outside of Hamilton. When I came back and built my house there, no one really thought anything of it."

Her eyebrows came together. "So...your mother was from the border region?"

"My father traveled through her settlement. He ended up staying."

"Do you still have family there?"

Just like that, she laid bare his pain. No matter. He'd invited it. "No. They're all gone now."

Her fingers brushed his leg in a soft, tentative touch. "I'm sorry."

He didn't want her pity. Didn't want to want her touch. "No big deal. Happens to everyone sooner or later, right?"

"I suppose it does." A brief hesitation. "I'm not very good at this, am I? Small talk."

"That makes two of us, then, Nadia."

She tucked her hand back against her body. "We're making good time," she said after an awkward pause. "Aren't we? It seems like we're traveling so far."

"Good time," he agreed. Whether that would continue was anyone's guess. Some of these roads had barely been passable during the normal winters that prevailed when



they'd been built. With worse conditions and no regular maintenance, it was impossible to tell what lay beyond the next bend.



## Chapter Four

When the temperature dropped, Nadia felt it in her bones. It hurt.

She shivered and moved closer to Shane, as if he could ward off the chill. Snuggled together in the sleeping bags he'd zipped together and covered in heavy quilts, they should have been warm enough. For the last few nights, she *had* been. Shane exuded heat and warmth and seemed perfectly willing to curl around her while they slept.

Tonight was no exception, but it didn't matter. A storm was coming, one she could feel inside as the earth shuddered under its fury.

Wiggling onto her side, she touched her fingers lightly to his jaw. His beard abraded her fingertips, an oddly affecting sensation that she couldn't afford to be distracted by. "Shane?"

He murmured something unintelligible and turned his face to her hand.

She was a woman, one who had been too long without a man. Her heart hammered against her ribs as she tried not to stroke his cheek. "Shane, please wake up."

"Too early," he muttered.

His lips tickled her palm, almost like a kiss. She shivered. "I think there's a storm coming."

He opened his eyes finally. "Shit. You sure?"

"Can you feel it?"

She saw the realization form in his eyes a moment before he shook his head. "Feels colder, maybe. That's all."

Maybe that really was it. He would know better than she would. Or maybe he simply didn't want to frighten her.

If so, it wasn't working. "I'm really cold, Shane. It...it hurts."

"Shh." He cupped the back of her head, his hand strong. Unyielding. "Look at me."

It was dark in the back of the truck, with only the tiniest sliver of moonlight to illuminate their surroundings. She tilted her head back and sought his gaze.

"I'm here," he whispered, determination etched on his features. "The cold isn't going to get you."

She swallowed a hysterical laugh that might have given away the depth of her fear. "If there *is* a storm, will we be safe?"

"Safe? Yeah. Whether we'll be comfortable depends on how long it lasts."

Nadia closed her eyes. "Would it be awkward if I asked if we could sleep the way we did on the solstice?"

He hesitated a shade too long. "Sure. Take off your shirt."

It wasn't a rejection, but with every breath spinning out into eternity, the brief pause felt like one. She squirmed onto her back, then to her other side, unsure if pain or relief formed the sick knot in her stomach. "Maybe later. If it doesn't get better."

One broad hand slid under the hem of her shirt. "Nadia.

Take it off."

She'd slept all but naked in his arms for two nights, and it had seemed innocent. Perhaps because she'd been weak, drained. Now, his hand on her skin brought heat that had nothing to do with physical warmth. "You're sure you don't mind?"

"Stop." His breath blew against the back of her neck. "Take it off."

Within the confines of the sleeping bag, it wasn't simple. She had to squirm to tug at the T-shirt, and by the time she had it over her head, she had no doubts about Shane's physical response. She settled with her bottom cradled against his hips, every fiber of her being focused on the firm press of his arousal.

Even though he was bigger, he stripped off his shirt with enviable grace. Once he'd discarded the fabric, his hand slid around to her stomach and pulled her back to his chest.

Warm. So warm. Nadia sucked in a shaky breath and curled her fingers around his. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." His voice had dropped to a rasp, rough and velvety all at once.

Too intimate. She swallowed. "We're both adults. I suppose it's inevitable."

"What's that?"

If he wanted to pretend she couldn't feel his erection, she'd play along. "Awkwardness."

"Survival," he corrected, though she felt him shift slightly, angling his hips farther away from hers.

Maybe the tension was all in her imagination. Maybe it was her, grasping at a connection with the only person who existed in her world. "Thank you for keeping me alive. Keeping me surviving."

"You going to keep thanking me?"

It bothered him. Another wall and she needed it right now. "Yes."

His fingers curled around her hip. "So you're trying to irritate me." The words were mild, devoid of anger.

"It's not *my* fault courtesy irritates you."

"It isn't courtesy. Once is courtesy."

Her temper had always burned hot, even above the freeze line. Digging her teeth into her lip didn't stop the words for more than a few heartbeats. "If you were the final authority on courtesy, you might have considered saying *you're welcome* instead of snapping at me like I'm making demands on you with my pathetic gratitude."

Shane stiffened, his hand tightening for a fraction of a second. "You're right. I'm sorry."

It might be days before the feeling of his fingers digging into her hip faded. Imagination painted a different scenario, fingers grasping as he slid his leg between hers. As he came into her. Made love to her.

Slow. In the limited space they had, it would be slow and so intense. Just like this, with his body curled around hers, the angle beautifully deep. Strong fingers on her breasts, his mouth on the back of her neck, one hand buried in her hair...

Her cheeks were on fire. She had to swallow twice to speak, and even then it was raspy. Hoarse. "Thank you, Shane."

His breath sloughed over her skin in a rhythmic pattern, and she realized he was laughing. "You're welcome."

Why he was laughing didn't matter. "See? That wasn't so difficult."

"I'm an idiot," he whispered. "And I'm never around people, not really. Slap me if you need to."

It was so easy to cover his hand again, to twine their fingers together. "I don't have any high ground. I'm blunt and not very diplomatic. Maybe that's why the elders tried to beat manners into me."

His laughter died as he tensed. "They did what?"

The impression she'd given of her people must truly have been barbaric for him to take the lighthearted words so seriously. "Not literally, Shane. Except for the baker, who smacked my fingers with a wooden spoon every time I tried to steal sweets from his cart--which was two or three times a week, until I started my training and could afford to buy them."

He eased immediately. "I always snatched pie. Little chocolate pies. My mother made them."

Her mouth watered at the thought. The rough camp food they managed was nutritious, and Shane made sure she had enough to fill her belly, but it didn't always taste very good. "So we have something in common. Neither of us can be trusted around pie."

"Good thing we're not likely to find any on the trail." His hand moved, stroking lightly, from her hip to the bottom of her rib cage and back again.

A caress. He was caressing her. Almost petting her. Every nerve awoke under his fingertips, until that expanse of skin felt hypersensitive. Alive. Nadia closed her eyes and let his touch do what nothing else could--warm her from the inside.

Let the storm come. Shane wouldn't let the cold take her.

\* \* \*

The storm hadn't quite subsided yet, but Shane was ready to move the hell on.

They'd spent the last day waiting for the snowfall to abate. It hadn't been so bad at first, plenty warm with them sharing the space inside the truck with minimal trips outside. But the proximity was starting to get to him, and he knew it was making Nadia twitchy too.

He pushed open the truck door and blinked at the heavy, clouded sky, at the snow that had drifted up around the truck. "Willing to risk it?"

Sleepy brown eyes squinted out at the vast expanse of white. She shivered and clutched the blanket more tightly around her shoulders. "Can we? I don't--this is beyond my experience."

If he went off the road, they might end up having to pack up and hike, something that would dramatically slow their progress. Then again, sitting here wasn't doing much for



that either. "I've got double chains on the tires. It's the best we can do, unless we want to sit here and let the snow pile up around us."

That thought clearly alarmed her. "No, I'm willing to risk it."

"Okay." There was no camp to break, no supplies to stow, so Shane slid back into the truck and cranked the engine. "Get your seat belt buckled, and hold on."

Nadia obeyed in silence. The seat belt clicked, and she tugged it twice, making sure it was tight against her chest. Only then did she curl her hand around the handhold to her right. "I'm comforted by the knowledge that werewolves have enhanced reflexes."

Reflexes that went hand in hand with the rise of the beasts inside them. When that beast slept, so did the speed, strength and agility that came with it. "Yeah, just bear that in mind."

The truck didn't stick, but that turned out to be the least of their problems. Down the hill and around the first curve, Shane heard the buzz of other engines. "Shit."

Nadia twisted in the seat, though the camper all but blocked the view behind them. "Is someone else out here?"

It sounded like snowmobiles, and quite a few of them. "Yeah. Could be nothing."

He felt the weight of her gaze. "You don't believe that."

He gave her the truth. "Sometimes gangs roam around after storms, looking for people who got caught up in them."

"Oh." Oddly, it seemed to calm her. "Do they come

heavily armed or trust their prey will be helpless?"

"Both, usually." Which didn't mean he couldn't handle them, especially if she could help. "Can you shoot a gun?"

"A shotgun or a rifle. I'm better with a knife." A pause. "Or magic. But if I use too much of it now, I'll be back to dying on you within a few days."

The buzzing grew louder. Either they were just up the road, or they were following in the trees that edged the highway. "I say if you have a choice between dying now or later, always pick later."

Nadia nodded. "If it comes down to our lives, I'll do what I need to do."

And so would he. The truck crept around the next bend, and there they were, four men--or hell, maybe women too--dressed in light-colored winter wear, snowmobiles idling beneath them. Shane shifted the truck out of gear and reached for the door handle. "Handgun's in the glove compartment. Rifle's in the backseat."

As he climbed out, he caught sight of Nadia twisting to reach for the rifle.

The figure in the lead swung off his snowmobile and tugged down a scarf, revealing a scarred masculine face and cold brown eyes. "Looks like you're a long way from home. Get caught in the storm?"

Shane sized them up as he shook his head. "Nope, just passing through."

"Not anymore." He gestured sharply, and the figures flanking him lifted a pair of nasty-looking shotguns. "You

take your little lady friend and start walking, and we'll let you go. You might make the town five miles back if you give it your all."

They had him outnumbered, and trying to reason with them would only make them more aggressive. "No."

The leader's eyebrows arched. "So you'd rather we shoot you?"

"I'd rather you look for your trouble elsewhere."

"Your choice, man."

Shane saw one of the shotgun barrels swing up, tried to move so the assailant would fire away from the truck and from Nadia inside it. The shot rang out, echoing in the cold-

--and the snowmobile exploded.

Fire shot into the air in an unnatural column, seething with angry color. The man who'd taken a shot at him vanished inside the inferno--and it had to be a man, because masculine screams shredded the air as pieces of the snowmobile rained down on the snow in a wide arc.

Shane hit the ground and rolled to his feet as the leader dived for him. He meant to call out to Nadia, to tell her to get down, but all he could manage was an enraged roar as the anger inside him broke free in a blinding rush.

The men weren't going to touch either of them, not if he could help it.

He swung at the man's midsection. The snow made his opponent slower, his dodge turning into a stumble. The crack of another shotgun blast--one that came from the

direction of the truck--cut through his next roar.

A second later the other two men leaped at Shane. No way should he have been able to take on all three of them, but he felt like they weren't even *moving*, like the earth itself was reaching up to mire them in its energy.

They couldn't touch him.

The first man went down, and Shane caught him with a knee to the face as he fell. The other two struggled to restrain him, but he shook them off and grabbed one. Two quick punches to the solar plexus and Shane's attacker staggered back, gasping.

There was no stopping him or the rise of the dark, primal energy that suffused him. Like heat, like...

*Life.*

"Shane!" Nadia's voice, shouting a frantic warning. A fist flew at his jaw, and he took the blow. It didn't hurt, only fueled the wildness inside him until his hands shook.

The third man hit the snow, his thick white parka clutched in one of Shane's trembling hands; his other balled into a fist and drove into the man's face, over and over.

"Shane." He heard her again, but far away. Through a haze.

A hand touched his shoulder. Slid down. The fingers that curled around his wrist were strong enough to dig in.

"Shane, he's down."

He froze. The only thing that penetrated the fog in his brain was that if he jerked away from her grasp, he could hurt her. "Yeah. Yeah, okay."

"We should leave," she whispered. "If we don't, we'll have to kill all of them."

They had no idea if these four were traveling on their own. They could be part of a larger gang, one that had split up to cover more territory. "Are you hurt?"

"No." She'd pulled off her mittens, and her bare fingers stroked his cheeks. "Are you?"

"I'm--" Shaking. Barely under control. "I'm fine."

"Shane?" Not fear in her voice. Worry. "I'm cold, and walking in the snow is difficult for me. Help me back to the truck, please?"

Kneeling over an unconscious man in the snow wasn't helping anyone or anything. Shane stood slowly and brushed the snow from his jacket. The blood from his knuckles. "I'll carry you. It's like you said--we need to go before anyone shows up."

He picked her up with one arm, so that her feet dangled above the ground. A gasp escaped her, her breath too hot against his cold skin. "I can take care of their snowmobiles. It won't take much."

"It'd probably keep us from having to worry about them."

Nadia nodded and lifted one hand, a small furrow appearing between her brows.

This time, he was close enough to hear the whispered words, something that sounded like an ancient language. Light kindled above her palm, a tiny, flickering ball. She tossed it at the closest snowmobile, and the tread snapped in a flash.

Magic swirled around them as she did it twice more, disabling the other snowmobiles, and Shane became painfully aware of the intimacy of their embrace. He forced himself to turn to the truck, open the door and set her on the seat.

Instead of releasing him, she reached for his bloodied hand. "Either you're a fierce warrior in your own right, or the werewolf needed a fight."

Her dark eyes were filled with an appreciation that shamed him. Shane pulled his hand away. "I've never been much of a fighter, so that must be it."

Nadia's hands fell to her lap. After an awkward moment, she turned and tucked her feet into the truck. "We should go."

He cursed himself as he slammed her door and stalked around to the other side. It wasn't her fault he was an animal, and blaming her for being impressed by the few good things the wolf could do for him wasn't fair.



## Chapter Five

Shane hated her.

Oh, Nadia wasn't so blind as to believe he knew it. The man was drowning in self-loathing, and she suspected that the source could be found in the clothing she wore, clothing that had belonged to a woman so important, he'd kept it with him even when she was not.

Perhaps she'd left him, unable to accept the violence inside. Perhaps he'd sent her away. In the darkest part of her soul, Nadia felt sure the woman had died--a tragic death that would make a man punish himself by living in lonely solitude.

However it had happened, Shane clearly despised the parts of himself that were wild--and she'd killed a human. Not in cold blood, perhaps--no, her pulse had pounded in her ears with the first shot, and protective rage had powered the spell. She'd been defending someone she cared for, but she'd killed nonetheless.

The camper that covered the truck bed afforded her room to sit up, but changing was awkward. Nadia struggled into fresh clothes as she listened to Shane's footsteps outside, crunching over the snow as he secured things for the evening.

He opened the door, just a crack--not wide enough to look in, and she realized he knew she'd been changing. "This might be the last night we have to sleep in the truck,"



he told her. "We're about to hit some of the trade routes. There should be stopover cabins, if you'd rather stay in those."

Hard to tell if he saw it as an offer for her comfort or a chance to put distance between them. "Will they be warmer?"

"Most of them have a heating source," he confirmed.

Better for her, then, with her energy so decreased by the recklessness of her first attack. Nadia crept down to the edge of the truck and eased the door wider in quiet invitation. "It might be more comfortable for me."

Snowflakes had gathered, clinging to his hat, his eyebrows. His eyelashes. "For both of us."

An ache spread through her chest. Longing. Not just the rush of lust that came from wanting a man's touch, but the desire born of wanting a man. She started to reach out but checked the gesture and eased back onto the pallet where they spent their nights. "Of course."

"Ready to sleep?"

"Yes." Maybe her last night in his arms. Her last night soothed into sleep by his warmth and steady breaths, his body against hers.

She'd always been a bold woman, confident enough to reach for what she wanted, even if it slipped through her grasp. Lovers had not been plentiful, but she'd had her share and enjoyed them. Her people weren't raised to be shy about sex.

Shane made her shy. The gulf between them seemed so

vast that reaching for him might end with her tumbling into nothingness, a fall that wouldn't end. They weren't from the same world. They were barely the same *species*.

Still, when he slid behind her, his arm falling over her waist, she knew he felt it too. The connection, the pull of desire.

He cleared his throat. "Warm?"

"I think so." She lifted her hand to brush his wrist where it rested on her hip. "If more witches had werewolves to curl up with, we might not hate the wintertime so much."

He chuckled, and his chest shook against her back. "I think I might be cuddlier than your average werewolf."

It was as good a way as any to broach a delicate subject. "And I have more sharp edges than your average witch. I'm not a soft woman. I've never been a soft woman."

"Because you're a warrior. Fighters aren't soft."

"Even among our people, some men don't care for women with hard edges. Women who are willing to kill."

He hummed. "I guess, for me, it would depend on why you were willing. If it was about conquest or survival."

Nadia traced her fingers higher, over the strong line of his arm. "What about protection?"

His breathing roughened. "That's survival, isn't it?"

"That's instinct," she corrected. "Protecting the people you care about, so fast and so vicious you're not thinking about it at all."

Shane stiffened. "You don't think what you did earlier bothers me, do you?"

"Something is bothering you, isn't it?"

"It sure the hell isn't you."

Nadia eased onto her back and sought his gaze in the uncertain light. "Would you explain it to me?"

His jaw was tight. Tense. "I don't know if I can."

*Just reach.* She touched his cheek. Took her chance. "I protected you. You protected me. It's been so long since I've had someone protect me."

His hand came up and wrapped around hers, but he didn't pull away. "I don't have limitless self-control, Nadia, but I'm *trying*."

It didn't seem that way to her. If anything, his control was better than hers. She'd blown up a snowmobile, after all. "You stopped. Those men would have killed you, killed both of us. And you still stopped. You *have* self-control."

"No, I--" He groaned and shifted somehow, rolled so his body loomed over hers. His hand slid under her neck, and he kissed her--hard.

The air escaped her lungs on a startled gasp. His lips were warm and firm, crushing against hers with so much force, so much need. Her arms were still trapped in the sleeping bag, tangled up so that there was nothing she could do but show her willingness with her parted lips and her hungry moan.

Shane's teeth scraped her lower lip, and he growled as he soothed the bite with his tongue. "See? No control left at all."

Maybe he would be a wild lover. A hint of the beast

wrapped in the control he didn't credit nearly enough. The thought heated her blood. "A softer woman would need your control, but I don't."

His thumbs brushed her cheeks. "What if I need it?"

"To hold yourself back from me?"

He licked her lip again. "To hold myself back, full stop."

Every swipe of his tongue tugged at things deep inside her. It made her question come out breathlessly. "Why?"

He hesitated. "Does it matter?"

She should say no. The desire throbbing inside her demanded it, desire fanned higher by the hard press of his body. Maybe if she'd been better at holding her tongue, at forming pretty, evasive words, but the truth tumbled out. It always did. "I don't know if I can lose myself in a man who doesn't want to be lost in me."

He rolled away, cursing when his shoulder slammed into a box. "Getting lost right now is a bad idea for either of us."

Nadia dug her teeth into her lip to hold back a protest—or a frustrated curse. Without his bulk pressing down against her, she felt light. Cold. Bereft. Her fault, from start to finish, and she'd managed to turn awkwardness into misery.

She inched onto her side, giving him her back as she struggled to catch her breath. It didn't work. "You're right. I ask for too much."

"It's not about what you're asking, Nadia."

"It is." If only because she'd asked for the sort of thing that meant forever and happy endings, not a desperate coupling before an inevitable parting. "That, and everything

else."

"I don't know what you want from me." His words were muffled, as if he had his hands over his face.

Nadia closed her eyes and concentrated until she knew her voice would sound casual. "I believe our cultures are at odds. We value civilized behavior everywhere except between a woman and her lover. Control is...not my experience."

"So what you're saying is that I've insulted you."

"No. I'm embarrassed that I asked for parts of you to which I have no right. Parts it would be reckless to share with me, when we are who and what we are."

He stayed silent for a long time. "Then that's it. It's reckless, and that's what we need to remember."

How helpless it made her feel. How alone. "Yes, I suppose so."

"Right. That's settled." One hand on her shoulder rolled her back, and he loomed over her. "Probably means I shouldn't kiss you again."

In that moment, Shane didn't look controlled. He looked hungry, and she wanted to be the thing he craved. "Will you?"

His gaze focused on her mouth. "I shouldn't, and I know I will. I want you too much."

Nadia leaned up and brushed her lips against his. "Enough to not regret me?"

He closed his teeth on her lower lip. "The only thing I would regret is if I hurt you."

Pleasure zipped along her nerves. She liked the feral edge, the hint of danger. The promise a mate was strong enough to be her equal. She found his upper lip with the tip of her tongue and teased him with a quick swipe.

A growl rose in his chest. "You really do like the thought of making me lose control."

Nadia laughed. "A man who can keep his control must not find his partner particularly inspiring."

"Oh, is that the way it works?" He bit her jaw. Not so hard it hurt, but still enough to curl her toes and speed her heart.

A pity the back of the truck provided so little room to move. She tried to lift her hand to his shoulder and bit off a curse when her elbow smashed into a wooden box. "This might test my dexterity."

Shane caught both of her wrists and somehow urged them up over her head. "Or mine."

The urge to laugh vanished, swallowed in sudden, painful arousal. Thick flannel pajamas didn't hide his arousal or the burning heat of his body. She inched her legs apart and moaned when he settled more firmly against her. "I'd enjoy testing so much of you."

"Would you?" He was watching her, his expression odd even in the darkness. "Why?"

*Why?* She'd always tested everything. Her boundaries, the rules, the outer reaches of her magic. She'd tested her lovers and the line between pleasure and pain.

It wasn't curiosity that drove her to test him. It was

craving. Hunger. "Because I want all of you."

His grin flashed white in the darkness. "You do, don't you? Every goddamn inch."

She'd felt his erection pressed against her bottom and knew he'd fill her, driving so wonderfully deep. "Show me how to make love when it's too cold to be naked."

"I could roll you over, take you from behind," he whispered in her ear. "Or I could promise to keep you warm."

The glint in his eyes was too stirring to give up. She couldn't move her hands, but turning her head let her close her teeth on his earlobe. "Whatever you're going to do, start soon."

"Uh-uh. Control, remember?"

She bit his ear again. Harder.

He growled again, his hands skating under the sleeping bag and blankets. He hooked his thumbs in her waistband and dragged her pants down, just far enough to ease one hand between her thighs. Calloused fingertips slid against her, and her breath caught at the sensation.

So fast, but he would know she didn't need a slow seduction and teasing foreplay. He'd feel the slickness of her arousal, know she could take him now, that the thought made her even wetter.

She told him as much, murmuring the words against his cheek. "I'm ready for you."

"Never had a man go slow?" he rasped. His touch retreated, returned. Delved deeper.

Often enough, but never a man whose eyes blazed with a lust that eclipsed simple desire. Perhaps control was its own quiet aphrodisiac, when a man knew how to wield it.

Shane knew. Her body spun tight as he worked his fingers inside her, his gaze never leaving her face. It had been endless months since she'd taken a lover, not since she'd been tainted by her sister's defection. She was alive again, remembering pleasure as a rusty moan escaped her.

Flannel abraded her nipples. She arched against the hard wall of his chest, rubbing against him to relieve the ache, but she only succeeded in making it sharper.

*"Shane."*

He captured her mouth again, swallowing her moans and answering them with hoarse masculine groans of encouragement. His fingers curved inside her, seeking, and his thumb swept up to tease her clit. Softly at first, until she found the leverage to lift her hips and show him what she needed.

He gave it to her. Firm touches, fingers rocking, thumb circling, and when he found the spot inside that made colors explode behind her eyelids, she tore her mouth away and begged. She begged as tension twisted in her middle, as her toes dug into the sleeping bag and her breasts rubbed against his chest. Her elbow crashed into the box again, and this time she didn't care, too intent on the climax that hung just out of reach of her grasping hands, until desperation made her cry out.



His mouth moved lower, and he pushed her head back with his jaw, bared her throat in one desperate motion. Then he bit her, hard enough to arch her back even more. Her fingers found his hair, and she tangled her other hand in the fabric of his shirt, clinging to him as all the heat he'd given her shattered into pleasure.

Shane trailed his lips over her cheek as she drifted down, whispering gentle words that soothed. "That's it, Nadia. Just like that."

If not for his body above hers, she might have drifted away. For the first time, she was completely thawed, warm and loose limbed and so relaxed she couldn't stop smiling, even as she kissed him. His lips, his cheek, then his jaw as she skated one hand down his back to shove at his pants.

He caught her wrist. "Not right now, honey."

Confusion pierced her lazy satisfaction. "What?"

"It's all right."

He might as well be speaking a different language.

"What is all right?"

He stilled, then pulled her hand up, out of the blankets. "I don't think we should do this right now. Not like that."

"Why?" She tried to tug her hand free. "You don't want me?"

Shane groaned again. "Fuck, Nadia, of course I do."

"Then *why*?" Another tug and this time he released her hand. Not that it did her a bit of good--trapped beneath him in the confines of the truck, there was nowhere to go.

"I don't have any condoms, and I don't--" He bit off a

curse. "It's the magic, right? Heading south in more ways than one."

Condoms. Humans' clumsy attempt to control nature. Some of the other tribes traded in such oddities, but she'd never met a son of the tribes who wanted to use one, not when magic was more effective--and far less awkward. "If I did not have a way to protect myself, I would never have asked you to make love to me. The spell required very little power."

His jaw tightened. "Protect yourself from what, exactly?"

Did he think she meant to protect herself from *him*? "The things that would require a condom. I'm not careless enough to risk a child when I have no home."

"And diseases? We still have them. Do your people?"

Her cheeks heated with the first stirrings of temper. "We're not primitives, incapable of understanding medicine. Our magic is far more reliable than the methods humans use to prevent such problems."

"And you want me to take your word for that." He didn't seem upset, or even offended. He mostly seemed tired.

His utter calm twisted the knife of his distrust until her heart bled from it. She slammed both hands into his shoulders as misery formed a painful knot in her throat. "Get off of me. *Please*."

He shifted away too quickly and cursed when his elbow slammed into the side of the camper shell. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded, Nadia."

She didn't care. She made it onto her side, turned away

from him, where he wouldn't see her rage turning to bitter tears of frustration and pain. "You didn't mean to sound as if I'm a savage who would trick you into touching her disease-ridden body and getting a child on her? As if I have so little respect for myself that I'd lie about such a thing?"

He didn't say anything for a long time. "You're right. I'm a bigoted asshole. Now aren't you glad you didn't fuck me?"

Answering would reveal the depth of her pain, something she'd never be able to keep from her voice. It took everything she was to lie still, to not shake as the vastness of her solitude settled over her.

She was alone, more alone than she'd ever been before. Her tribe might not accept her back. If the elders had been trying to rid themselves of an untrustworthy warrior, they might just sell her again--there were always human scientists willing to pay for test subjects, considering those subjects' short life expectancies. Or her people might eliminate her once and for all.

Whether they'd betrayed her or not, they'd long since shunned her. She could easily imagine her life now, an endless sea of strangers who would look upon her customs and find them peculiar. Who would mistrust her or dislike her. Who would push her away to protect themselves.

She swallowed and found the strength to speak quietly. "I'm sure things will seem better in the morning."

"Yeah. I'm sure they will."

Tears burned. Burned her eyes, spilled over the bridge of her nose as she turned her head into her rough pillow. If

she'd been outside in the frozen night, they might have crystallized into ice.

So foolish, crying over a man. Over a clumsy rejection from someone she barely knew. She must have become soft in recent months to let his sarcasm and his disinterest wound her. To need his comfort and affection so much that being shoved away felt like a mortal blow.

How wildly her people would laugh. How low they'd say she'd fallen. Crying over a *were*wolf.

Things would seem better in the morning. They had to, if only because she could hardly imagine a moment more humiliating than this.



## Chapter Six

He was a coward.

Shane clenched his teeth so tightly his jaw ached as he navigated another slick curve in the road. Nadia's tense, withdrawn silence was nothing less than torment and nothing less than he deserved.

He knew he had to explain, but where the hell could he begin? *You see, I pissed you off on purpose because I don't trust myself. And it has nothing to do with you and everything to do with the dead woman whose shirt you're wearing.* That would end well. He'd be lucky if she didn't knock him out cold and roll him into the nearest ditch.

The sky had been blue for much of the morning, but now it looked gray and overcast. Next to him, Nadia shivered. "Is there another storm coming?"

"Maybe." Definitely, but the last thing he wanted was to scare the hell out of her if they didn't manage to get to shelter.

A nod and she turned to look out the window. "I'll make do."

More than anything, she sounded numb. Resigned to the hell that stretched out before her.

"Look," he began. "Can we talk about last night?"

He heard her heartbeat jump. She gave no indication, simply continued to stare at the snow. "Of course, if you want."

"I don't think we have a choice." They couldn't have it hanging over their heads. *He* couldn't have it, even though it was entirely his fault.

"We had a misunderstanding," she said, voice stiff. "We wanted different things. I'm not sure there's anything either of us can say to change that."

"I took the easy way out," he confessed. "That shit I pulled last night wasn't about you, but it was easier to let you think it was. So I did, and I'm sorry."

"It occurred to me." She slanted a look at him, piercing and angry. "It even occurred to me that you might have thought you were protecting me, though I'd prefer your disregard to misplaced condescension."

He swallowed every argument or rationalization that rose. "Understood."

"Is it?" Her hands came to rest on her knees, and he'd spent enough time with her to know that if her mittens hadn't prevented it, she would have laced her fingers together until her knuckles turned white. "Do you understand the depth of the insult when a man decides he deserves to choose the form your pain takes?"

*Don't, Shane. Don't*— "What makes you think it was about your pain at all?"

She paused. Tilted her head. "You did."

"Well, it wasn't."

"All right." The momentary spark fizzled, turning her voice numb again. "I'm sorry to have caused you pain. It won't happen again."

He didn't have time to argue, not if he was going to keep them alive, especially in uncertain weather. He needed his focus, needed--

He caught a flash of something, right angles through the steady snow. A sign of some sort, still standing, though the letters had long since worn away. "I think there might be a stopover cabin up ahead."

Nadia perked up a little. "Do you think it will have a bathtub?"

"Some do. Standing showers, at least."

Her wistful sigh filled the truck's cab. "Do you think..."

The truck lurched, and Shane gritted his teeth as he carefully righted it. "Do I think?"

"It's not important."

The drive was gravel, not quite as slick as the cracked and damaged blacktop of the winding road. "Spit it out, Nadia."

"I'd thought we could stay an extra night here." Her fingers curled around the seat. "But getting to the border as quickly as possible should be our priority. It was a passing thought."

He glanced at the sky again and shook his head. "We may not be *able* to leave before then."

"I see." She kept her voice calm, but she couldn't hide her fear. He heard it in the pounding of her heart, could almost smell it, acrid and sharp, in the cab of the truck.

He spoke without thinking. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"I know." No hesitation, no quaver or change in tone that



would indicate a lie. "I think I'll always be afraid of the storms. Cowardly for a warrior, I suppose."

The cabin came into view, a squat, square structure with a heavy-looking door and no windows. It looked solid, provided it was empty. There were no vehicles or tracks, but the snow was fresh and still accumulating. Hard to tell, especially if someone had pulled around back or into the surrounding forest to hide their presence.

Shane tugged at his door handle. "It'll be fine."

Nadia didn't respond. She pushed open her door and slid out into the drive. Snow came to her knees and continued to fall from the sky in fat flakes that gathered on the hand she held aloft. Surrounded by cold and ice, which usually left her shivering, she looked strangely pensive. "It feels different here."

"Different how?" He hurried to walk in front of her. At least he could break a path to the door and keep her from floundering around.

When he looked back, she was still standing there, her hand up, her eyes slightly unfocused. He said her name, and she started and brushed the snowflakes from her hand. "Odd. It feels odd."

The hair on the back of his neck lifted. "Odd like dangerous?"

"No." She reached his side and actually smiled. "No, it feels...welcoming."

They could be near a spring or some other pocket of energy that would fuel her magic. "That's good, right?"

"If we're going to be trapped here--" she shrugged, "--it won't be as dangerous for me if the earth isn't quite as draining."

Only one way to answer that. "Come on."

The door had been chained and padlocked, and Shane rattled it with a curse. "We'll have to break this."

Nadia stripped off her mittens and touched the padlock with her fingertips. "Old-fashioned," she murmured, then closed her eyes.

With a whispered syllable, her hand began to glow. She dug her teeth into her lower lip, concentration furrowing her brow. Underneath his feet, the world seemed to stir, power rising with an almost tangible sleepiness. It circled, brushing over him, and focused on Nadia as if the earth itself *was* welcoming her.

The chain holding the door shut crumbled, and the padlock hit the ground with a thump. Nadia jerked her hand back and frowned. "I suppose that works."

He stared at the sundered metal. "Did you even mean to do that?"

"I meant to weaken the lock." An admission, one she didn't sound entirely pleased to make. "The earth is awake. It doesn't feel malicious, just...eager."

It didn't feel that way to him. Normally, he would have been glad not to battle the awakening beast, but their circumstances made it impossible not to worry about the seemingly dead earth beneath him. "I don't feel anything."

"And I feel too much." She pushed the door open. "I

wonder if something happened here that changed the flow of magic. There are rituals that can be performed, or sometimes, in periods of great upheaval, a witch can bind herself to the earth."

The front room was filled with equipment of some kind, covered with dusty sheets of plastic. Shane peeled back one edge to expose a cart with a computer terminal and a microscope. "Not a cabin, after all."

"No." The fear was back, her heart pounding, her breathing too fast. She lifted another piece of plastic and uncovered a pair of smooth silver collars. "Not a cabin."

A research station, maybe just like the one she'd run from, except this one was dead. Quiet. "There's no one here, Nadia. No one but you and me."

"And the ghosts." She reached out, her fingers hovering over the collar, but she seemed reluctant to touch it. "Maybe that's what I feel in the earth. It wants to protect me."

He cupped her elbow in his hand. "The bulk of the facility must be underground. We need to look for access and find the control center. Maybe we can get some power in here." It would be better than the pitch-dark that would descend when they closed the front door behind them.

"I can--" The light formed before she got her hand up, a cheerful glowing ball a foot across. The power seemed to dance, flickering in yellows and reds, like firelight across her skin.

She pursed her lips, clearly bemused. "It's like a puppy that's trying to please me. I've never felt anything quite like

it."

Definitely not magic the human scientists would have courted, even if they'd been able. "Maybe that's why they left. Hard to control test subjects who have that kind of magic at their beck and call."

Nadia began to explore the room, the ball of light bobbing behind her as she moved. "It's a trade-off. In the north, we're easy to control, but we don't last long. Building here, on a pocket of power, might have seemed like a solution, but I'd wager the first witches they brought here banded together and attuned themselves to the earth."

With potentially disastrous results--at least for the scientists. "Good for them."

The second door revealed a set of stairs leading down. Nadia stepped away and glanced at him. "Did you want to look for whatever is necessary to turn on the power? I'm not sure I'd recognize it even if I found it."

She obviously didn't want to descend into the darkness, so Shane pulled his LED flashlight from his pocket. "I'll find it. Will you be okay staying up here?"

"I'll be fine. I can bring in some supplies, before the weather turns worse."

He tensed at the thought of her outside alone, but he nodded. "Better to hurry. If I don't find something in ten minutes, I'll come back up, and we'll make do."

"Thank you, Shane." Her smile looked ragged around the edges. "If this is like the place where they kept me...the cells are underground. I'd prefer to stay upstairs, if I can."

"Sure." The normally bright flashlight barely seemed to penetrate the darkness as he descended the stairs.

The lower floor opened into a wide hall lined with doors, each with a plain black sign engraved with white letters. Atmospheric Science. Environmental Monitoring. Energy Analysis.

He made his way down the hall, each step falling with an odd thud and squeak on the slick tile. Finally, near the end, he found a door labeled with red letters instead.

Maintenance.

Shane turned the wheel to disengage the rotating lock, grunting when the neglected mechanism groaned and squealed. The door shuddered and swung open, revealing a cavernous room with pipes and rusted catwalks and a thousand looming shadows.

"This place is creepy as fuck," he muttered, mostly to break the silence as he picked his way through the maze of equipment. He was familiar enough with machinery to recognize some of it--evaporators and boilers, mostly--but some was utterly beyond his experience.

*Oh well.* If he couldn't get the power running, it wouldn't be the end of the world. They had food and water, and the building provided excellent shelter. They could easily ride out the storm, especially with Nadia's magic.

He'd expected to feel uncomfortable in the face of her increased power, but instead all he felt was relief. It seemed perfect--this place where she could draw strength from the earth without that same power sapping his

humanity.

The diffuse, eerily blue beam of his light flashed past a control panel along the back wall, and Shane laughed. Solar controls, not so different from the ones at his home. As long as the cells were still operable and connected, he could have them up and running in minutes.

Perfect.

\* \* \*

With power came the opportunity for hot water. The research station had several bedrooms and a set of barracks-style rooms filled with cots. Each had a bathroom, and Shane hadn't seemed insulted by her urgent need to claim one of them for her own.

Of course, hot water didn't simply appear. She twisted the knob and flinched away from the icy spray. Science, not magic, which meant she had to wait for the water to heat. It was tempting to trace the pipes to their source and speed the process along with a spell or two, but the power all but sparking at her fingertips made it clear she had a more pressing concern.

Leaving the water running, she spread a towel on the tile floor and settled in a comfortable position, legs crossed, hands resting on her knees. It took only a few moments to drop into a half trance, one that left her open to the flow of magic but protected from its power--or so she thought.

*Something* slammed into her hard enough to make her

sway. Wild energy, so strong it was almost sentient. It spun around her, brushing over her bare skin and teasing at the ends of her hair.

Eager, like she'd told Shane, but worried too.

Now she understood why. Witches had been brutalized here. No doubt some of them had died. At least one of them had spilled blood and begged the earth for help, and his or her death would have sealed the bond. Nothing so formal as a spell, but with blood and death, intent carried more weight than ritual.

"I'm here," she whispered, turning her palms upright. "I'm here, but of my own will."

*danger-monster-run-safe*

Not words, not quite, though they tickled at her ears as if she could hear them. How many witches had died here? How many had taken their last breaths and left parts of themselves behind?

Enough to make the earth as frantic as a child concerned with a favorite toy. The image almost made her smile as she shook her head. "I am safe. The monsters are gone."

*hurt-tired-power*

Her skin prickled as magic washed over her, so much, so fast that she was surprised her hair wasn't standing on end. Weakness vanished. Exhaustion disappeared. Energy and life pulsed inside her, more than she'd had before her kidnapping, more than she'd ever felt except during the rowdiest summer solstice celebrations.

So much and the earth still pushed, trying to feed her more, until her nerves were overloaded and light sparked from her fingers as the power sought an outlet. Nadia slapped her hands together and whispered the words to the light spell just to give the excess magic somewhere to go.

A dozen spheres appeared, floating around the bathroom and bathing it in a rainbow of color that reflected in the mirrors in a dizzying array. The water had begun to run hot, and steam softened the glow until it felt like a wild jungle with flickering lights. A fantasyland so beautiful she almost wanted to share it with Shane.

Nadia laughed, and her pleasure seemed to dim the earth's anxiousness. Leaning forward, she pressed both hands to the cool tile. "Thank you. I'm safe, I'm healthy and I have the power I need to find my way home. You don't need to help me anymore unless I ask for help. Rest easy."

*happy-safe-love*

"I'm safe," she repeated, and the earth seemed so pleased that it didn't realize she hadn't said she was happy or loved.

*Because it's inanimate power, Nadia, not a person.* This time she laughed at her whimsy as she rose and stepped into the blissful heat of the shower. No, the earth wasn't sentient, even if magic had given it a sort of consciousness. It couldn't tell she ached with longing. That every step toward the freeze line gave her body strength and put another cut on her heart.

Shane was the most hopeless man she'd ever cared for,



and those feelings made her sister's choice appear rational in comparison. Nadia had heard of just one witch who'd mated a werewolf, and that had been an act of magic so forbidden that her choice was spoken of only in whispers. Horror stories and cautionary tales--the woman who had bound herself to a wolf and shared in his madness, proof of a deranged mind in a culture that valued civilization above everything else.

Even that was hopeless. The spell--if it existed--wouldn't temper the monster inside. Shane would have to be willing to trust her with his darkness, trust her to be strong enough to face his wolf. He'd have to trust *himself*, and that seemed the most insurmountable obstacle of all.

The water washed away the dirt of hard travel, but it couldn't ease her anxieties. Still, Nadia stayed in the shower until she'd found the courage to face him again, to pretend she didn't bleed every time he turned away. The bag he'd packed for her included a comb, which had no doubt belonged to the woman he couldn't bring himself to discuss.

It felt awkward, using her things. Wearing her clothing. For the first time, she wondered if any attraction he felt was to a dream or a memory, if opening his eyes to see her face shattered his desire. It made donning the pink flannel sweatpants and the silk-screened top even less desirable.

Instead she found a fluffy towel that covered her from breast to knee--and tried to pretend it wasn't a test. *Look at me. See me.*

If he turned away, her heart might break.

She found Shane kneeling in the room he'd cleared, his head down and his hands fisted on his thighs. His shoulders heaved with his deep, even breaths, but every exhalation was edged with a rumble, almost a growl.

Something was wrong. Worry prickled up her spine.

"Shane?"

The growl deepened, and his eyes flashed yellow as he looked up. "The earth's awake."

"I know. I—" She'd released the earth from its bondage, told it to rest. She hadn't even considered what that would do to Shane. With the writhing power beneath them no longer focused solely on her, she'd thrown him into his worst nightmare.

"I can hear you." He stood, his movements graceful and sure enough to make it clear he could have moved much faster—if he'd wanted. "Your heart. It's pounding."

He'd sense her fear and assume she was afraid *of* him instead of *for* him. "The earth touched me as well. I'm worried for you. Worried that I unleashed something that will hurt you."

"Hurt? No." His nostrils flared, and he stepped closer.

"I'm not hurt."

She held her ground. Not to avoid hurting him, but because she knew a predator when she saw one. Weakness invited attack. Flight would encourage a chase. She wouldn't allow herself to consider the sensual possibilities of being caught, not when he'd scent her

arousal.

So she studied him. Tried to find the man she knew under the beast. "What do you need, Shane?"

He ignored the question and ran the back of his hand over the towel she was wearing. "Where did you get this?"

It was such an unexpected question, she didn't know what to do besides tell him the truth. "There was a stack of them in the bathroom cupboard."

His jaw tightened. "Take it off."

Nudity didn't bother her. Neither did the promise of dirty, carnal sex that lingered in his gaze. Not so much desire, but proof any intimacy would be edged with danger, with wild hunger. She craved such a coupling--

But he didn't, so she tightened her fingers on the towel. "I don't think I should."

He turned his hand, curled his fingers under the top edge. He was touching her skin, his knuckles grazing her breast, and the caress made it difficult to concentrate on his words. "It smells like another man."

It smelled clean to her, but as acute as his senses were, perhaps one wash hadn't been enough. There was no map, no guide to know which of his instincts she should avoid and which she could test.

The possessiveness in his gaze seemed too fierce a line to cross. Moving slowly, she eased her arms from her body. The edges of the towel slipped, leaving the middle caught in his grasp.

Shane dropped it to the floor and drew her closer. "Still

smell it." He bent his face to her skin, inhaled on a deep breath. "You should smell like me."

It was pathetic--how eagerly her body heated under his touch. She was as needy as the earth had been, clinging to any contact, clutching at a connection. Her nipples hardened under the rough scratch of his T-shirt. Warmth flooded her, pooling between her legs. She'd be slick soon enough, wet and all but whimpering for him.

He growled again and lifted her clear off her feet, against his body. He was hard, well muscled--the kind that came from hard work--and she wrapped her legs around his narrow hips before she remembered she had to slow him down. She had to be the one who said no.

She parted her lips, but all that escaped was a gasp as Shane crashed them into the wall. His erection ground between her legs, coarse fabric sliding against too-sensitive skin. If she rocked, just a little, she might be able to center that glorious friction on her clit--

Shane growled and bit her throat.

Magic screamed through her. Her body pulsed. She clutched at his back, digging her nails into his bunching shoulders as she shuddered under the tumbling sensations. Pain, pleasure, bone-deep satisfaction that echoed in him as he marked her, claimed her, *owned* her.

His fingers tangled in her hair, jerked her head back, and his mouth descended on hers in a rough kiss. The edge of his teeth bit into her skin, hard enough to bring blood.

Too hard. Not for her--the edge of pain made the pleasure of his tongue that much sharper--but the gentle lover who'd touched her with reverence would surely shy away from it. Even with lust fogging her brain, it didn't seem right. To take him into her body, to let him slake their lust, all the while knowing he'd hate himself for every bruise, for every mark.

A violation of the worst kind, if it was in her power to stop him. So she tried, gradually at first, sliding her fingers into his hair as she inched her lips from his. "Shane, we shouldn't--"

He edged his thumb into her mouth and ground against her again, this time prompting a shudder from her that left a feral grin curving his lips.

She wanted to bite him. She wanted to give in, to be craved and desired, ravished and claimed. It was touch, so necessary to life that she'd been withering without it, and Shane watched her like the world began and ended with her pleasure.

It was the promise of comfort in an otherwise dreary life, and it wasn't hers to take. Not at his expense.

The energy sparking between them gave her the answer. She closed her eyes and reached for the earth that was so eager to obey her. *I'm in danger. Give the power back to me. All of it back to me--take it away from him.*

He stared at her, his brows drawn together in a frown, and the clouds cleared from his gaze. "Nadia--"

Relief. Regret. Both clamored for her attention, battling

the rising magic that made her ears ring. Too much too fast, and beneath them, the earth chanted a frantic warning.

*monster, monster, monster, monst--*

Thunder rocked the research station. Lightning exploded. Nadia hit the floor on her knees and cried out at the jarring pain, unsure how a storm had formed inside four walls.

*PROTECT*

"No!" The denial shredded her throat as she fought her way to her feet. Not a storm. The earth, but she could only see in blurry, inverted colors, her eyes struggling to recover from the blinding flash of light. "I'm safe, I'm safe from him. He's not the monster--"

Her vision cleared, and she found Shane slumped on the far side of the room. He'd knocked over a chair and upended a crate of supplies before he'd hit the wall. Glass must have shattered. She felt a shred slice the bottom of her foot and ignored it, staggering to his side. Sore knees protested the sudden drop to the floor, but she ignored that pain too as she turned him over and reached for his neck, desperately seeking a pulse.

It was there, fast but strong, but something hot left her fingers slicking over his skin. Blood. It dampened the hair at the back of his head, stained his shirt in quickly spreading blots of color.

She was a warrior, not a healer. The only spells she knew were meant to keep a partner alive so she could find real assistance. Maybe it would be sufficient, if a werewolf's

healing could finish the job.

It had to be. She closed her eyes and tried to find the words. The scent of blood filled the air. Sharp. Metallic. She could almost taste it--no, she *could* taste it, her blood, where his teeth had slashed her lip.

*Focus, Nadia.*

Simple words. No one had ever told her the original language, only that it was ancient. Not just before the quakes, but before men had built cities. The time of wild plains and stone temples and spears and songs. The time her people wanted to bring back.

*Focus.*

She whispered the incantation and felt magic stir. Shyly, offering the hand of peace because she'd scolded it. Frightened it. With the earth's help, she wrapped the only healing spell she knew around Shane, whispering the phrases over and over, until they became a chant.

A prayer.





## Chapter Seven

One second, Shane was lost in a red-hot haze of need. The next, he was slammed against the wall with enough force to knock him stupid.

"Shane." Nadia's voice, frantic with worry. Her hands framed his face. "Can you hear me?"

He shifted with a grunt, lifting one hand to the back of his head. "What the hell was that?"

"The magic," she whispered, voice shaking. "It was trying to protect me. It didn't know."

Memory assailed him, the feel of her body pressed close to his. "Fuck." Self-loathing washed over him, and he cursed again. "Shit, what the fuck did I try to do?"

"No, Shane. It wasn't like that." The words came too fast, tumbling over one another in her rush to get them out. "You didn't do anything I wouldn't have enjoyed, if it had been *you*."

He'd attacked her. The proof of it was staring him in the face, from her bloody, bitten lip to the marks on her neck. "Jesus Christ."

"It was my fault." She stroked his cheeks with her thumbs. "The magic wouldn't have taken you if I hadn't gotten careless. You didn't have a chance."

Even now, he could feel the ghost of that feral need rising in him. He had to get her hands off him, had to look away from the soft, fervent forgiveness in her gaze. "I have

to get out of here."

Her hands fell away. "There's nowhere to go."

"Other rooms. Places." He wasn't even making sense. "I can't be around you if I'm out of control, Nadia. I *can't*. You don't understand what I can do, what I am."

"I understand what you can do. I didn't stop you because I fear you. I stopped you because you have the right to choose whether you wish to bed me."

"I could have killed you."

"No." The word came out hoarse. Almost angry. "I wouldn't have let you."

His head throbbed, and he pulled his hand away. It was slick with blood, and he vaguely remembered Nadia's whispered chant. "Did you heal me?"

"Not all the way. I can't." She bit her lip, then winced as her teeth snagged the cut. "Werewolves have some minor healing ability, don't they? My spell stabilized you, but your own body must have done the rest."

"Doesn't matter." He shifted to his knees with another groan.

"I'm sorry." Nadia rocked to her feet, her balance odd because she favored one leg. Her right foot bled, and she slipped as she tried to take a step back. "*I could have killed you.*"

She was naked, but she was also hurt. Shane picked her up without a thought. "Are you really trying to one-up me on the danger scale?"

That earned him a smile. "You're not the only one

capable of darkness."

No, but Nadia didn't have to guard against it every moment. It didn't sleep inside her, waiting for a chance to rear and consume like a caged, hungry animal. "It's not funny."

Her smile faded. "Please put me down."

"I have to look at your foot."

"Put me down before you drop me. You have a head wound, and I have a scrape." A little twist and she took the choice from him, squirming out of his grasp. Instead she got one arm around his waist and led him toward the sitting area, with its dusty, barely used couches. "I was dying when you found me. I'm not anymore, and it's time you stopped treating me as if I were fragile."

*Fragile* was a relative term—but so was *dangerous*.

"You're still bleeding. I'm not."

Nadia spun so fast her damp hair whipped past his face. "I'm bleeding from an inconsequential wound. My protective spells will guard against infection. I get worse than this every time I practice with the other warriors. I've walked miles with broken bones, with knife wounds. I was shot once." She held out her arms, almost daring him to look at her naked body. "Our healers take away the scars. Maybe if I had them you'd believe that nothing you can do to me physically is worse than what I've gone through a hundred times before."

For a moment, Nadia disappeared. The *room* disappeared, and he was bleeding onto the new spring

grass as Cilla's screams echoed through the clearing.

"Have you fought wolves? Seen them kill?"

"Yes. When I was twenty-four, a pack formed just south of the freeze line and destroyed three of the Fifth Tribe's villages." Her voice softened. Her fingers touched his shoulder. "How did you become a werewolf, Shane?"

He ignored the question, because he *had* to make her understand. "Not fought them in battle. By yourself, when it's just you and--One wolf isn't a problem, not even for an armed human or a pack, if you're ready for them. See them coming. But if a pack gets the drop on you..."

"Is that what happened? A pack ambushed your family?"

No time to hide from the truth. "Her name was Priscilla. She died, and I lived. Sort of."

Those warm, gentle fingers cupped his cheek. "I'm sorry."

He caught her hands. "Stop. I survived, but now I'm exactly the sort of monster who killed her. *Exactly.*" He'd risen from the bloody grass that way, a creature meant to rend and kill.

"Not exactly. The magic can make us powerful. Make us wild. It can make us a little bit crazy." She tugged one of her hands away, then pressed it to his chest. "It can't make us hate. It can't make us evil. Do you know why my people need warriors?"

Why did anyone need to fight? "Because the world is fucked-up, and it'll gladly eat you alive if it gets the chance."

"Because some people are bad. And hate fueled by the

earth's power is the vilest danger of all, whether it's a werewolf's or a witch's."

It was worse than simplistic; it was a cop-out. "Maybe you're just making excuses for what we all are, right down there at the lowest common denominator. Animals."

Her eyes cooled as she pulled away from him. "Animals survive. They protect and they kill when they have to. There's honesty in their brutality. Humanity and its children have always been the masters of cruelty."

His temper spiked with her withdrawal. "Fine, make my point for me. Lower than animals. Monsters."

"At our worst," she agreed. "Maybe what makes the rest of us different is how willing we are to turn cruelty on ourselves. You hate yourself for the things you might do, and I shame myself for the things I've already done."

"Name one thing."

Nadia lifted her chin, and challenge filled her eyes. "I'm ashamed I stayed with a tribe that scorned me instead of following my sister. And I'm ashamed I showed you the most vulnerable parts of myself for all the wrong reasons."

Just like that, she shamed *him*. "I'm sorry."

"You saw what I let you see." The words trembled, and her eyes were too bright. She stepped back and spread her arms again, revealing her naked body, smeared with blood, her wet hair clinging to her neck and shoulders. "This is what I am. Savage. And it isn't fair to ask you to accept something in me that you can't tolerate in yourself."

The comparison startled him. "When you go below the

freeze line, you don't lose your mind."

Nadia lowered her right arm and turned enough so the intricate tattoo circling her arm and shoulder faced him. "This is the mark of a warrior." Her fingertips found a small crescent with five black dots marching along the top. "And this is a mark of honor. Fifty kills in battle."

"In battle," he repeated. "Battles you chose to fight, right? You don't get it, Nadia. You don't understand what it's like to not be in control, to just...just fucking check out."

Her eyes narrowed. "To do things you don't want to do?"

"To be *gone*," he snapped. "I'm not talking mistakes or regrets or survival. I'm talking no more thought, no stopping everything dark in you that wants to be freed."

"I see." She crossed her arms across her chest, and for the first time, she seemed uncomfortable in her nudity. "Maybe it's time we went our separate ways. I've seen what the darkness inside you desires, and it may plague you less once I'm gone."

She'd be fine without him now, and her plan was nothing less than what he'd been about to suggest—but it still cut deep. "You should take the truck and the supplies. You need them more."

"If you think that's best." No sweet, grateful smile. No soft thanks. She turned without so much as a wobble and walked away from him, her spine stiff and her stride even, despite the bloody footprints she left with every step.

He watched her, numb and exhausted. There was nowhere to go, not for either of them. No matter what, they

had to wait out the storm before continuing.

Perhaps before saying goodbye.

\* \* \*

After all the pain, all the longing, their goodbye was anticlimactic. Nadia sat behind the steering wheel and watched as Shane listed the functions of the various knobs and handles for the third time. This was the only thing they'd seemed capable of discussing in the two days they'd ridden out the storm, as if anything more personal than her feeble knowledge of automobiles and tactics for driving on snow would shatter the awkward truce they'd struck.

"When you get farther south, you'll have to take the chains off the tires. It's not complicated, but you might have to work at it for a while. Break them if you have to."

It wasn't the first time he'd told her, but she didn't point that out. "All right."

"And if you need to take it out of four-wheel drive--"

"I know, Shane." With every repetition, she waited for the moment he'd break. When he'd touch her. Kiss her. Tell her it was a mistake. Ask her to stay.

The last vestiges of the weakness she couldn't bring herself to banish. Her heart was tender, but it would heal with time--if she left.

She had to leave. "Thank you for everything. I'll send payment north, once I retrieve my belongings."

"Don't." His shoulders tensed. "Just let me know you made it okay."

It was one more thing she didn't want to fight about. "I'll send word."

He nodded, and his hand skipped from the gearshift to her arm. "I'll go with you if you need me to, Nadia."

Her bruised pride offered half-truths that would spare them this interminable parting. All she had to do was let them out. Say something misleading like, *I'll be safer on my own*, and not tell him she feared for her heart, not her body.

A petty part of her wanted to, but she couldn't bring herself to form the words. He'd hurt her deeply, but her pride would eventually forget his disregard, and regrets wouldn't make her heart heal faster.

So she smiled and shook her head. "You'll feel better once you've gone north again. And I'll feel better once I've gone south. This is how it needs to be."

Instead of pulling his hand away, he slid it up, over her shoulder to the back of her neck. "It's how it needs to be."

That hungry look was back in his eyes, and she didn't trust it anymore. The darkness inside him might crave her, but the man had kept his distance time and again, and every withdrawal hurt more than the one before. "I need to leave."

He blinked. The hunger remained, stronger than ever, but he released her anyway. "Drive carefully."

"I will." Maybe when she was gone, he'd regain his control. Maybe he wouldn't remember that urge to kiss her at all, just like he couldn't remember the way he'd touched



her as if she was vital to his survival. The beast scratching the most primal itch.

She pulled the truck's door closed before she spilled out of the seat and offered herself to him. Her hands trembled against the steering wheel, but a deep breath provided the steadiness she needed to remember how to start the vehicle.

She navigated the driveway carefully and refused to look in any of the mirrors to see if Shane was watching. It felt like he was, in any case, perhaps laughing at her inching, nervous progress. If she failed this quickly, he'd never let her make the trip alone, and she'd never have the self-preservation to walk away a second time.

Walk. Her morbid sense of humor stirred a sad laugh out of her, and it echoed in the empty cab. *Call it what it is, Nadia. You're running away.*

Not far, though. Shane might not leave for another day or two, and she could give him one parting gift.

She eased the truck onto the snow-covered road and used the compass mounted on the dash to steer her toward the border. Slow going, with the latest storm, and her hands ached from clutching at the steering wheel. Tiny numbers marked her progress--the odometer, he'd called it, when telling her how often she'd need to stop to replenish the fuel from the supply packed in the back. The numbers ticked off a mile and a half before she found a stand of trees that suited her purpose.

More than a mile but the earth still sang in her blood.

Whatever pocket of power fueled the magic beneath the research station extended so far that it reached for her even now. Calming the magic in the land had been difficult once she'd spilled her blood, but Nadia had accepted the offerings and unleashed them in trivial things. Bright lights to cheer her lonely bedroom. Heating spells to warm her empty bed.

She'd be out of range soon, and the magic would rebound. If Shane was within range, it might claim him again with the same viciousness as it had before. She could spare him that.

The magic reached up, eager to please her as soon as she slid out of the truck. A whispered greeting and the snow began to melt around her, every footstep toward the trees widening the circle of suddenly bare ground. If there had been grass before the endless winter, it was long dead, leaving her tramping across increasingly mudlike dirt as she looked for a good spot to say goodbye.

In the end she found a large, smooth rock that looked like it had been left by one of the earthquakes. The pines around her were young enough to have grown after the explosion. A spell dried the surface of the rock enough to kneel, though her bulky clothing made doing so awkward.

Priscilla's clothing. A woman who'd died, torn apart by werewolves while Shane was condemned to live as the thing he must hate most in the world. He had every right to fear his beast, and she'd poked and prodded him at every turn, driven by her selfish need for him to accept the

wildness inside her.

"No more pain from me," she whispered, stripping off her mittens. The rock should have been cold under her bare hands, but it was as hot as cement on a summer day.

Nadia sighed and closed her eyes. "I'm leaving. It's time for me to go home. To walk my own lands, where I'll be safe. With my own people."

*monsters-danger-run*

"Shane's not a monster." She fixed an image of him in her mind, not so much his features, but the feel of him. Warm and a little wry. Prickly when his temper was stirred. Playful when he wanted to tease. Intense. Protective.

It took time. She could have been kneeling there for hours, pouring her heart into the unyielding rock. Her legs ached, and the cold made her weary, but she focused on Shane and offered him to the land, wrapped in her emotions, the sharp bite of longing and the first fragile strands of something so hopeless she refused to call it love. "This is Shane. He should always be welcome here. Don't offer him magic, but don't keep it from him if he needs it. Protect him, and you'll protect me."

**MONSTERS**

Frustration pricked at her. "He's *not* a monster. He's--"

The howl of a wolf filled her ears. Distant, so distant it could have been Shane, if he'd given in to the power--or it had taken him. She had time for one moment of dread before the earth rose up, all its power focused on a warning that screeched through her soul.

## *RUN*

Another howl to the east. A third, southeast, and closer. Hunting cries, tearing through the air again and again, and sluggishness faded from her body as she came to her feet with a grace that did her training proud.

"No more running." This was a battle she could understand. Knives and magic and blood and death, not breaking hearts and flowing tears. It was time to be who she was. A warrior. A daughter of the Second Tribe.

A witch, even north of the freeze line.

*No more running.*



## Chapter Eight

Shane made it to the freeway interchange before he had to stop and take stock of what the hell he was doing.

The snowmobile he'd found needed a tune-up, and the engine idled roughly as he sat, staring at the collapsed ruins of what had once been Interstate 80. A trail of sorts had been carved through the countryside, parallel to the broken roads, infinitely more practical now that the earth lay frozen beneath them.

Retracing his path had brought him back here, to the crossroads. The makeshift road to the left would take him closer to his house. Straight ahead would lead him back east, where the settlements were well populated and structured more like the cities of days past. And if he turned right, he could head south, toward the borderland that edged the freeze line.

His left hand trembled on the grip.

He could do it now, turn the snowmobile and travel down toward the border. He had a house and plenty of things waiting for him back in Hamilton, but why? Why hadn't the people in the settlement already run him out, or worse?

Because he'd pretended to be one of them. He lived above the freeze line, where the beast inside him would sleep, and he passed as human, living and working and avoiding the townspeople as much as possible. He'd tried so damn hard after the attack that had claimed Cilla's life,

promised himself he wouldn't lose that last link to her.

All that effort and loneliness and where had it left him? Aching, because he'd lost Nadia too. In giving in to his fear and locking the wolf away inside him, he'd stranded himself firmly between two worlds. He knew less than nothing about that part of himself--and it *was* part of him, whether he liked it or not--and now he had to pay the price for that ignorance.

He couldn't go home, because it wasn't his home. He existed there, but he had no friends, nobody who loved him. They'd notice he was gone, wonder what happened, but no one would mourn him. They couldn't, because no one knew him.

Maybe he just needed to head for the border, embrace the beast and hope Nadia was right, that being a werewolf didn't make him a monster any more than being a man had made him one. If he stayed far enough north, the magic would be a trickle instead of a deluge. It could work.

Too late to salvage the mess he'd made of his time with Nadia, of course. Hurting her was the last thing he'd intended, but it had happened anyway, despite his best intentions.

*"The road to hell's paved with those, Sullivan."* One of his grandfather's favorite sayings, and it had never been truer than it was now.

He revved the engine. He wasn't going back to Hamilton. If his life there was worth fighting for, he wouldn't have been so damn ready to leave it behind in the first place. And yet he'd abandoned everything, dropped it because--

Because Nadia needed him. She would make it to the freeze line, be healthy and safe and maybe even happy, so at least he had that. That made the trip worth it all.

He pointed the snowmobile toward the southern path but stopped as the skin on the back of his neck prickled with awareness. It took him a moment, but he managed to pinpoint the source of his uneasiness--a scent on the frigid breeze. He inhaled deeply, ignoring the way the cold air burned his nose and chest, but the pain intensified, splintered when he recognized the scent.

Wolves--a suspicion confirmed when the howling began.

He sent snow spinning behind him in a powdery arc as he turned the snowmobile around. It could be a normal wolf pack, unconcerned with a witch traveling on her own, but he couldn't rely on that, especially after the magic she'd freed the night before. If it had affected him so viciously, what could it have done to others in the area?

The vehicle was a utility model that ate up the miles quickly, but not quickly enough to calm the pounding of Shane's heart. He was going to be too late, he never should have left and Nadia was going to be hurt because of him--

He cursed and gunned the engine wide-open, riding harder. Anything to get to her faster.

\* \* \*

The wolf pack wasn't hard to find; their attack wasn't subtle, and neither was Nadia's.

He found her at the top of a small rise. Flames rose



behind her, consuming a stand of trees and reaching angrily toward the sky. The wolves ranged in front of her, circling and charging, but dodging the fire that reached for them if they ventured too close.

The snow had melted for two hundred yards in every direction. Nadia wore no coat, no mittens, no hat. She was gripping the hunting knives he'd left with her, and they looked like a part of her as she flowed through the battle.

Her skin and clothes were smeared with the blood of the fallen wolves, and she probably could have taken down the rest of them too, tired as she looked.

She wouldn't have to.

Shane didn't bother with guns or knives. There was no time for that, not when the wolf inside him howled to fight, protect. He tore at his clothes, reached for that carefully banked fire and set it free, let it blaze through him.

Nadia might not have noticed him yet, but the other werewolves had. He had no sooner hit the ground on four paws than a member of the pack broke off and snarled, lunging at him.

He'd only fought once before as a wolf--when he'd fought back against his and Cilla's attackers and killed them all in a blind rage. After that, he hadn't spent more than a few terrifying minutes in this form, and he expected to struggle, stumble. Instead he met the attack with the solid mass of his shoulder, a twist and a vicious bite. Instinct, as potent as if he'd always lived this way.

The wolf howled, and one of its packmates charged to

the rescue. At the top of the hill Nadia slammed a knife into a wolf's side before lifting her head, her gaze coming straight to him. "Shane."

Strange, that he could think so clearly when he never had before. The world was crystal, and he and Nadia were at the center of it.

Shane rebuffed the second wolf's attack with a sharp bite to one front leg. It went down, floundering on the wet ground, and he bit down again, this time around its throat.

Blood gushed. The first wolf returned, slamming into Shane's side and sending him tumbling. Teeth closed over his leg, but he twisted, thrashing hard enough to pull his leg from between those razor-sharp teeth before they clamped down.

Power filled him, intoxicating. Freeing. He wasn't a monster, a mindless beast. He was a warrior too.

Then Nadia was there, bloody and beautiful. The two remaining werewolves fell back, and Nadia sank to one knee and plunged a knife into the earth. Her voice rose. No quiet whispers, but a melodic chant, and power ripped through him in its rush to gather above her hand in a golden ball of deadly fire.

She whipped her hand forward, and the magic crashed toward the wolves. One took the hit solidly, flying off its feet with a broken howl of pain.

The other spun and leaped at Nadia. Shane met it midair, a collision of bone and muscle and fur that should have hurt but didn't. The wolf snapped at Shane but

retreated when Shane raked his claws across its muzzle.

A yelp met his attack, but his final opponent was fast. It twisted when they hit the ground and lunged, digging sharp teeth into Shane's shoulder.

Fast but smaller. Shane pressed through the pain, ignored the tearing and burning in his muscles as he forced the wolf to the ground, its head extended.

Throat exposed.

One final lunge and Shane snapped his jaws with a growl, holding on as the wolf thrashed and struggled.

Not so long. The body beneath his went still, and boots scraped the earth behind him. "It's over, Shane."

For one terrifying moment, he thought he might not be able to let go. Then he relaxed, stumbled back onto the slushy earth and bumped into her leg.

Nadia wrapped her arms around him, burying her face against the back of his neck. "You're bleeding," she whispered, and the words sounded choked. Her fingers slid through his fur, a cautious touch. "You're hurt."

*"Not bad. I'm fine."* He thought it as though he was saying it, and it hit him that he knew she would hear.

If she found it unusual, it didn't show. She lifted her head and smiled at him. "You're beautiful."

*"I'm thinking."* Nonsensical words. *"My clothes."*

She left him with obvious reluctance but returned a moment later with his jeans and sweatshirt. "They're muddy, and you're wounded. You could stay a wolf. I can drive you back to the research station..."

He shifted as her words trailed off, though he wasn't quite sure how he did it. "I'm fine." A violent shiver took him, and he reached for her. "Are you okay?"

Her arms came around him as she whispered something that eased the biting chill from the air. "The fire isn't making it warm enough for you to stand here naked, Shane. You'll become ill."

Not with the earth alive beneath him, guiding him. "In a minute, Nadia. Just look at me."

At last she fell silent. Her chin came up, and she met his gaze. Blood smeared her cheek and her forehead.

He cupped her face tenderly. "I shouldn't have left."

"You didn't." The words were a whisper. Nervous and unsure. "I did. Violence is in my blood. You don't need more of it in your life."

"Neither do you, but we both need something else." He shivered again and grasped his clothes. "You were right. Let's go back to the station."

"Shane--" Nadia caught his wrist. Her other hand curled around his neck, and she rocked onto her toes and kissed him.

He wanted to drop to the ground with her underneath him, to celebrate victory and *life* in the most immediate, primal way possible. He settled for taking her mouth, delving deep and relishing the way she leaned into him, clutched him with shaking hands.

She pulled away too soon, almost panting for breath. "Clothes," she whispered, her gaze dipping down his body.

The blush in her cheeks deepened, and she spun away. "I have to calm the fire. Then we can go."

And he would only distract her. "I'll wait in the truck." He shivered into his clothes and made his way to the truck, where he climbed into the passenger seat. He trembled with fading adrenaline and shock, and he had to bring both under control before they became a danger.

Only a few minutes passed before she joined him, fumbling with the truck's keys before she managed to start the engine. Air blasted from the vents and quickly turned warm as she twisted onto her knees on the bench seat. "I need to use my stabilizing spell. It will be more effective if you don't fight it. If you trust me."

"I'm all right," he lied.

"Shane." Tension filled her voice. "Don't lie to me. If you don't trust me, be man enough to admit it. But don't--"

"I trust you," he cut in, his teeth chattering. "No more energy, Nadia, not on me. You had to fight. You should rest."

"Shh." Her fingers cupped his face, gentle and soothing. She kissed his forehead, then began to whisper vaguely familiar sounds, the words she'd chanted over him the night he'd been injured.

Energy washed over him, through him, in a warm flood that sapped his pain and stilled his shaking. It felt calming, strong, like Nadia herself. "Thank you."

"Hush. Save your strength." She eased back and smiled at him. "Let me take care of you."

"I'm okay." Even the lingering twinges from his injuries had begun to fade.

Nadia made a disbelieving noise as she slid behind the wheel. She dug her teeth into her lower lip and curled her fingers around the gearshift with all the concentration of someone embarking on a delicate, complicated operation.

And for her, it must be. She'd certainly never driven in conditions like this, but she managed perfectly, navigating the slick road with careful skill. Shane leaned his head back against the seat and watched her.

She was muttering by the time they reached the snow-covered main road and swearing under her breath by the time they reached the research facility. Even then she shushed and scolded him until he let her help him out of the truck and into the building. She bypassed the sitting area and the bedroom he'd claimed, leading him straight to the room she'd slept in, and past it, to the bathroom.

She turned on the shower and stripped off his clothes. By the time he stood before her, naked, billows of steam rose around them. Shielding them from the rest of the world.

"Into the shower." Strong hands coaxed him into the large tiled enclosure, where hot water splashed against his skin. Nadia joined him a moment later, stripped to the skin and watching him with worried eyes. "We need to wash the blood away so I can see your injuries."

"What about yours?" He searched her, sliding his hands over her wet skin, but all he could find were a few shallow

scratches and welling bruises.

She ignored him, her attention fixed on his hip. Her eyebrows came together as she skated her fingers over the smear of blood quickly disappearing under the spray. "I saw them bite you."

"I—" The memory of slashing teeth seemed like an almost forgotten dream as she slipped to her knees on the floor, and Shane could barely hear his answer over the thudding of his heart. "I think they did."

The pad of her thumb swiped over his hip. "Healed. You're healed." She tilted her head back and smiled. "I told the magic in the earth to take care of you for me. I think it listened."

There was a chance that energy was also responsible for the way his cock stiffened at her touch—a chance Shane dismissed, because Nadia had had this effect on him since the first time she'd nestled into his arms. "Stand up."

Awareness filled her eyes, and heat followed. The water pounded against his back, protecting her from the bulk of the spray as she leaned in and pressed a slow kiss to the healed skin at his hip. "Are you sure you want me to?"

Instead of answering, he hauled her to her feet with his hands under her arms. "I'm sure."

"Shane..." Just a whisper and it trembled. She tilted her head back, closing her eyes, even as she ghosted her hands up his arms. "Is this you? Do *you* want me?"

"I don't think I've ever felt so clear." It came out sounding too harsh. He tried to steady his voice, but this was so

damn new for him. Uncharted territory. "I'm not fighting anymore, but I'm not crazy either. And I want you, sweetheart."

Still, she seemed uncertain. Like she didn't dare believe, even as her grip on his shoulders pulled him closer. "All of me?"

"All of you." His hands shook as he slid them around her waist. "With all of me."

She slicked one hand down his chest and worked it between them, before her fingers circled his cock. "Every bit of you," she murmured, voice wicked with promise. "Here and now, Shane. I've waited too long for you to take me."

Everything but her disappeared in the roar of pleasure. He kissed her, his lips urging hers to part and let him in, let him stroke his tongue over hers. She obeyed with a moan, but there was nothing passive in the way she licked at him, the way she nipped at the tip of his tongue in wild, joyful challenge.

It would be easy to lift her against the tile, drive deep. Make them both crazy. Shane dragged his mouth to her jaw. "Can't take my time in here."

Her fingers slipped from his erection and found his hand instead, coaxing his fingers to stroke between her legs. She was wet already, slickly hot, and she moaned as he circled her clit and thrust deeper, eager to feel the heat of her body around his fingers.

She was tight, so tight he had to squeeze his eyes shut



and drop his forehead to her shoulder. "Fuck, you feel good."

"I feel..." The words trailed off as she shivered, clasping at his back. Her lips found his ear, and she moaned throatily and rubbed her body against him, skin slicking against skin as if she wanted to wrap herself in his scent. "I feel you."

Him. Everything, the things he'd tried so hard to keep hidden. He raised his head, found her gaze and rocked his hand against her. "I want you to feel *good*. Come for me."

Full lips parted on a gasp. Her eyes were always dark, but now they were endless, her pupils wide, her gaze unfocused. Pleasure proved itself in small ways, in her rapid breaths and the flush in her cheeks and especially in how her teeth dug into her lower lip as she began shifting her hips in tiny, furtive movements.

Even with his body blocking the bulk of the water, the spray misted her skin and left her hair a damp tangle. Strands stuck to her neck as she tilted her head, the noises escaping her more frantic than yearning. She braced one hand on his shoulder as she gasped out a plea. "Harder."

Shane bit her neck as he complied, giving her firmer thrusts that flattened the heel of his hand hard against her clit. A soft cry echoed against the walls, then another as she tangled her fingers in his hair. Her body tightened, a trembling flutter before she moaned his name and came around his fingers in sweet, shuddering spasms.

The clench of her body along with the heady scent of her

arousal threatened to shatter what remained of his control. Shane bit her again, this time on her shoulder as he lifted her against the cool tile. "Say it. Tell me."

"Take me." Even shaking, she wrapped her legs around his hips, rubbing the wet heat of her core against his cock. "Hard and deep, so I feel every bit of you."

One quick thrust and he could be inside her, buried to the hilt and swimming in pleasure. Instead Shane forced himself to go slowly, to take her inch by inch. He watched her face, as enraptured by her expression of desperation as by the way she felt around him.

"Shane." Her fingers curled. Nails dug into his shoulders. Her frantic whimper turned to a snarl as she dug her heels into the small of his back and tried to force him deeper. When he kept to his lingering, rocking advance, she moaned and tilted her head back in hard-earned submission.

When he closed his teeth on her skin again, it was hard enough to bruise. Mark. Satisfaction welled inside him, left him dizzy and panting. "I didn't want this to be too fast, but I don't know how long I can hold on."

The noise that escaped her was half laugh, half disbelieving moan. "Too slow already. Show me your passion. Show me you can't resist me."

"Resist you?" He pulled back and slammed into her again, unable to keep the growling edge out of his voice. "Does this feel like I can resist you a single goddamn bit?"

Her only response was another of those choked noises

that married lust and need. The legs wrapped around his hips were strong, sleek. No longer the weak, fearful witch he'd found, the woman in his arms was wild and hungry, challenging him as she met every rough thrust.

The fierce need that gripped him drove him on, pushed him to push her higher, faster. Take her with him.

"Shane. Shane--" She kissed his cheek. His chin. Her open mouth pressed against his with a moan, and that damn trembling started again, only this time her body was tightening around his cock.

Control was a distant memory, and he gave in, riding out her orgasm until his began, pleasure exploding through him in a shocking rush. He fisted her hair and bared her throat, muffled his groan against her soft, wet skin. "*Fuck, Nadia.*"

A whimper. She shivered as if they weren't surrounded by hot water and steam. Her nails pricked his skin, dug in. "I love you."

His knees went weak, and he reached blindly to shut off the water. "I was going to come back for you. I didn't want to go, because I want *you*." He kissed her again, hard. Desperate. "Love you."

She smiled, that bright, open smile that made his heart flutter and skip. "You came back. For now, that's all that matters. We can figure out everything else after we rest."

And there was so much to decide. Where they'd go, what they'd do. "After we rest," he agreed.

Her laughter tickled his ear. "In the bed, perhaps?"

"Bed." He didn't want to move, but she had to be

exhausted. He lowered her to the floor and reached for a towel. "Wrap up, and we'll get dried off."

"I can manage." And she did, though she wobbled, clearly more exhausted than she wanted to admit.

He picked her up, despite her protests, and carried her down the hall to the sleeping quarters. "You're dead on your feet, sweetheart."

"Not dead. That's the point." When he tried to set her down, she clasped at his arm. "Do you understand? A pack of wolves, above the freeze line, and *I'm not dead.*"

"I know, but it doesn't matter." He had to explain, make her understand what he had only just realized. "It wasn't about you being strong enough. It was about me. I'm not a monster. I'm *me.*"

"You're you," she agreed, finally relaxing against the mattress. "I know it seems impossible--" A sleepy yawn cut through the words. "I have an idea. I'll tell you when I wake up, if you promise to stay here and rest with me."

Tenderness washed through him as he stretched out behind her. "I'm staying. I'll be here, and you can tell me all about your idea. But sleep now."

Her breathing evened, and Shane blinked to stay awake. A little longer, enough to reassure himself that she was here and that she was his.

\* \* \*

The use of too much magic in too short a time had always

given her unusual dreams. Fire raged through them, melting snow and leveling all in its path. She dreamed of battles fought with flames and won with sunlight, and it only made sense when she awoke to find herself half pinned under a wonderfully warm body that banished even the memory of cold.

Nadia liked sleeping with Shane, liked it more when there was nothing but skin between them. There were long days ahead--days when they'd walk on frozen earth again--but she didn't need to fear the chill. Not with him at her side.

She tried to move carefully, but as soon as she stirred, he slipped an arm around her. "What is it?"

"I didn't mean to wake you." But she couldn't regret it, not when he pulled her back against him so easily.

"I was already awake." He smiled softly. "You must have been dreaming, because you were kicking like crazy."

"Maybe." She lifted her head and brushed a kiss along his cheek. "How are you feeling? How does the wolf feel?"

"Quiet." His arm tightened. "Because you're here, I think."

Loath as she was to upset the peace he'd found, he needed to know the truth. "I'm afraid that might be exactly it, Shane. The earth is different here. The power has been bound to me since I spilled my blood. If I ask it to protect you, it will. I can't promise that will be the case if we leave."

His smile faded. "We can't stay here forever."

"No. We can't." For the worst of the winter, perhaps, if no one came to reclaim it, but a life trapped in the boundaries

of stolen land was not a life worth living. Nadia cupped his cheek and met his gaze. "But if you could live like this--if the wolf was awake, but you knew it wouldn't overtake you--would that be enough?"

Shane swallowed hard. "All I need to know is that I'm not going to hurt anyone, least of all you."

Nadia wet her lips. Gathered her courage. "There's a spell. Legend, really, but one witch in my lifetime is said to have performed it. It would bind me to you--not so differently than how I'm bound to the earth here, but more permanent."

It took him a while to answer. "Is it dangerous for you?"

At least she could answer honestly. "No. It's safer for me if we want to stay north of the border. It gives me access to the power your wolf channels. The power that overwhelms you. It might sharpen my temper, make me a bit less civilized. But I'm already a little wild."

Shane found her hand, wound their fingers together. "If it's permanent, are you sure you want to do it?"

"More permanent," she corrected, ignoring the flutter in her chest. "You're the one who should be asking yourself that question, Shane. Any spell cast can be broken...but you'd have to trust me to let you go if you asked."

No hesitation. "I'd trust you with anything, Nadia."

The way he said her name sent shivers through her. She closed her eyes and smiled, reveling in that soft pleasure. In the promise of a future. "All the stories say the same thing about the witch. She settled along the border, in the Outer Banks territory. We could go there, once the worst of the

winter is past."

"This station is still stocked. We could winter here, no problem, provided no one else shows up."

"And by spring, you'll know if extended exposure to me is likely to send you running away with your tail tucked between your legs."

The corners of his mouth quirked up. "If traveling with you in my truck didn't do it, nothing will."

Nadia rolled them, until he was sprawled on his back and she could straddle his waist. Her hands dug into the pillow on either side of his head as she smiled down at him. "I was being easy on you."

"Oh, were you?"

"Of course. But if you think you can handle me now..."

He ran his thumb over her lower lip. "I can handle you."

She believed him. She wanted him, so she bit his thumb gently, thrilling at the way desire spilled across his features. "So handle me, Shane Sullivan."

He smiled through his growl, even as he returned her bite by closing his teeth on the inside of her wrist. "With pleasure."





## About the Author

How do you make a Moira Rogers? Take a former forensic science and nursing student obsessed with paranormal romance and add a computer programmer with a passion for gritty urban fantasy. Toss in a dash of whimsy and a lot of caffeine, and enjoy with a side of chocolate by the light of the full moon.

By day, Bree and Donna are mild-mannered ladies who reside in the Deep South. At night, when their husbands and children are asleep, they combine forces to unleash the product of their fevered imaginations upon the page. To learn more about this romance writing, crime fighting duo, visit their webpage at <http://www.moirarogers.com>. (Disclaimer: crime fighting abilities may appear only in the aforementioned fevered imaginations.)





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