

The background of the cover is a photograph of a woman with long dark hair, looking down with her eyes closed. Behind her, the upper torso of a shirtless man is visible. In the top right corner, there is a small graphic element containing the text 'Loose Id' and 'Dept 57'.

Loose Id

Dept
57

*Griffin's
Treasure*

LYNNE
CONNOLLY

*Department 57:
Griffin's Treasure*

Lynne Connolly



www.loose-id.com

Department 57: Griffin's Treasure

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Chapter One

Chana strode into the Skeffington mansion and hurled her car keys on the marble demilune table. Disappointingly, the expensive surface didn't crack. She let out a shriek of pure rage and watched the butler come at a very fast walk into the other end of the large, echoing hall.

"Miss Rafiz, are you all right?"

"Depends what you mean by 'all right,' Osborne. Is Mr. Skeffington in?"

Osborne's thin lips turned down. "He's in his office, though I'm not sure he's home to visitors."

"Well it looks like I'm not a visitor any more. I'm back to make his life hell. He deserves it, after what he's done to me."

Casting a darkling look back at the tall, cadaverous Osborne, Chana took the corridor that led to the office wing.

She had a bone to pick with Skeffington. Several bones, in fact. Still dressed in the uniform of a San Francisco cop, Chana was only too aware of how incongruous she must look in the marble hall and the corridor lined with paintings. Originals, as Mr. Skeffington was fond of telling visitors, but when they questioned further, he passed them on to Edward, his third son, the one who knew about Art.

When Skeffington's personal assistant stood to prevent her access to the inner office, she brushed past him and burst through the double doors. Eric was far too refined to grab her and yank her back.

"What?"

Skeffington's craggy face revealed a flash of surprise before he lifted his hands and smiled at her. "I wondered when you'd arrive. Come and sit down, dear."

"Don't you 'dear' me," she growled, beyond anger now. She decided to stand and loom over him, except his desk was huge and the effect largely lost.

George continued to stare at her. Hell. She sat down. "I know you were the person who got me dragged off the street, so why?"

George Skeffington's face relaxed, as far as it could with half a ton of Botox in it, and a broad grin spread across his full lips. "I'll never know why you have more spunk than any of my children by blood." Chana growled, but said nothing. "I had you pulled, my dear, because you were a danger. You're more of a liability than an asset as a cop. Anyone could target you. They'd have to put cops on duty to guard you. I gave you your head, but it's time to come home."

Chana ground her teeth. She didn't call this place her home, and she was perfectly capable of looking after herself. He didn't have to do this. She wasn't his daughter, didn't even bear his name. "Then why did you let me go through the training course? Why did you let me believe I was free of you at last?"

He gave her a positively avuncular smile. "Because you needed breathing space. I even let you rent that slum of an apartment on your wages. You wanted to be independent. I can respect that, Kanchana. It's more than the boys have ever tried to do. I was proud of you, but it couldn't go on."

What gave him the right to be proud of her? He was no relation of hers, although he'd tried to control her as he did his own children.

"I don't see that at all. My mother married you for a total of two years. If you hadn't had my picture put in the paper, nobody would have known of my connection with you. It *was* you, wasn't it?"

"Not directly."

She made a sound of derision. "What does it matter? You had it done. You had my picture put in the paper, and all that fucking speculation started. After that, I couldn't move for cops wanting dates, favors, or trying to partner with me. How *could* you?"

"I wanted to see how far you could go. And the training will come in useful for what I have in mind for you." George hit a button on his intercom. "Bring in some coffee, will you, Eric?" He turned back to Chana. "You passed the exam, and I didn't interfere. You were just a wannabe cop, and you passed. But you couldn't have gone on the streets. You must see that. Someone would have blown your cover as just another cop, exposed you as my daughter, and they wouldn't have hesitated. They would have kidnapped you, and that would have cost me a bundle. Not good for the police, either. I just persuaded them to see that."

"Is that it? The money?"

He hesitated before he denied it. "No, of course not. I want you safe. That's all."

"I could still try for some kind of career in the SFPD."

"So you could." He paused when the assistant brought in the coffee, and the scent made her stomach contract with need. At least she still had that much cop in her. A craving for coffee seemed to go with the job.

It would have been childish to refuse something she wanted, so she accepted her cup.

"And your medical condition," he continued when Eric left, George not even thanking him for the service. "It could get worse. You know the stress the job has. But yes, you're right. If you want to pursue a career off the street in the department, I won't stop you. You could even be useful, one day."

Stony-faced, Chana listened to the death of all her hopes. Oh yeah. She could take a job in the office, progress up the administrative ladder, and one day help the Skeffington estate from her high-rise in town. Become part of the organization, a

Skeffington babe. George Skeffington would have another scalp on his belt. If she wanted a career of her own, independent of him, she would have to move across America. Perhaps even leave the States. He had a long reach with interests everywhere.

Not even leaving the country would help her. Skeffington's influence crossed political barriers as though they didn't exist.

"Before you pursue that, there's something I'd like you to do for me." George's voice, always mild, gained a sharp edge. Only someone who knew him well, someone as sensitive as Chana, would have discerned it, but it remained there nevertheless. She picked up the bone china coffee cup and took a sip. The coffee tasted excellent, as always, but she would have swapped it in a minute for a chipped cup of flavored dishwater at the station house.

"What?"

"Angelina left." Chana couldn't say that surprised her. George's latest wife had never settled down properly, and hadn't managed her life well. George didn't take infidelity lightly, especially when the story appeared splashed over the newspaper gossip pages. "I don't have a hostess, and you could do the job blindfolded. A guest's arriving tomorrow. I want you to show him around, help him while he's here."

She'd need to her hair done and get a facial. "Who is it?"

"Josh Friedland, one of the team members from that English soccer club I bought."

"Oh yes." A vague memory of a golden god in the gossip mags, dressed in something stupid. No doubt he wouldn't have two brain cells to rub together. She'd met sports stars before. One of her stepbrothers was heavily into soccer—football, he called it. Skeffington thought this club a big deal, but something that happened half a world away concerning a sport her little stepbrother played at school didn't excite her one bit.

"He's coming over here because he's suffered an injury and he wants a break. Doesn't want to watch his team-mates play and not be able to join in. He'll recover, but it will keep him out of the game for the rest of the season. He's twenty-five, and he's a valuable commodity. I want to get to know him, and I want him happy while he's here."

She couldn't believe what she heard. "You're pimping for me?"

George's mouth pursed into a tight, prim button. "Of course not. I just want you to act as hostess while he's here. Is that too much to ask?"

"Probably. In any case, it's hardly likely he'll take an interest in a thirty-year-old has-been cop." In her experience, sports stars preferred stick-thin bimbos with fake boobs and hair down to their asses. She hardly qualified.

"Have that surgery and you can look eighteen again." George took a long sip of his coffee, keeping his eyes trained on her face. "You never took me up on that offer I made a couple of years back. It's still open."

He was provoking her to a reaction. Chana saw it in the pale eyes. So she chose not to react. "I'm happy with a C cup, thanks." Having Skeffington buy her new tits didn't work as her idea of a functional relationship. Not that she was even sure what that consisted of. "I'll make a deal with you, George. Not a family deal, but a business deal." George took business deals far more seriously than he did family agreements. Not that that would make for any guarantee. If George really wanted something, he tended to go for it, and to hell with ethics.

He nodded, his attention completely on her. People thought George had a vague, watery look, or maybe because his eyes appeared just so pale. Anyone caught in the full beam knew different, and he had caught Chana enough times to make her aware of the full force of George Skeffington's full attention.

"If I look after this...boy...for you, you'll let me go and do something for myself. George, you started with nothing. You're always telling us that. Let me do the same. Give me a bit of room." In order to win a life of her own, she would have to make a deal with the devil.

George sighed and reached for his coffee cup. "I can't let you go, Chana. Not like that. When my marriage to your mother broke up, I paid for your education. I took an interest, which is more than she did. Now it's payback time. I need you to be my hostess until I get a divorce and find somebody else."

George had run through five wives. Chana had no doubt he would find another one, if he had to. He wanted a return for the expensive education she'd never asked for, the wardrobe, the allowance she'd refused to touch since she turned twenty-one.

He glanced at her. "Get your hair done, get a facial. Get a wardrobe." He ticked the items off on his long, thin fingers as he spoke. "I'll give you a schedule, and I'll need you there when I have a business dinner or a function. When I have guests to stay, especially when they're from out of town, I'd want you to make yourself available to them, to show them around, take them to theaters, concerts, museums, bars, whatever they want."

She met his gaze. "And what *don't* you want me to do?"

He nodded. "I don't need you to sleep with them. If they're unpleasant, if they hit on you too hard, you tell me and I'll take care of it."

She'd needed him to say it. Out loud, so it lay between them as part of the agreement. "And then you'll let me get a life of my own?" George was too rich, too powerful. She couldn't run from him, so she'd have to make a deal with him. And hope he stuck to it.

He smiled. "I will. What do you say?" His voice softened. "I know you want a life of your own, but for now I can't give you that. You know why."

She waved a dismissive hand. "That's nothing. Lots of people have diabetes." Diabetes had struck her when she reached puberty. George had discovered her in a coma after a huge fight about her schooling. The argument had upset her, made her skip a couple of meals, but that was her fault, not his.

A spasm of pain crossed George's face, and Chana knew he was thinking of her mother's death, caused by a diabetic coma. "I still miss your mother." The very restraint of his response convinced her this time he meant it. George's demonstrations of emotion could be extreme, but never real, always staged. George never did anything without a reason, usually several reasons, so the twinge of real sorrow Chana glimpsed in him now meant far more than any floods of tears might have done. Chana's mother had become his third wife, different from the others. Almost the same age as he—unlike Angelina—as smart as a button, and the only wife not the least cowed by his influence, his power, or his moods. "I'll never forgive myself for not finding her earlier after she collapsed."

"She's gone, George." He'd beaten her. She knew it, and he knew it. "Okay, it's a deal." If she'd felt more strongly about the SFPD, she'd have fought harder for it, but she didn't. Being a cop wasn't all she expected it to be. The paperwork drove her crazy, and her colleagues just didn't understand her. Or she didn't understand them.

George smiled broadly. "It's a deal."

Chapter Two

Josh winced when he stepped off the plane and the full force of a California sun hit him in the eyes. He'd already pulled his sunglasses from his pocket, and he hastily slid them on as he took the walkway in the airport toward the exit.

The official examining his passport and green slip didn't do a double take the way Josh expected. He didn't ask for his autograph, or why he was here instead of with the team before the end of the season. Josh felt smug. To this man he looked like just another person, another tourist. A rich tourist, sure. He'd arrived with a first-class return ticket and expensive leather hand luggage, but a tourist just the same. Some people knew him here, but not everyone. He could walk along the street without fans mobbing him.

At the rental car stand, Josh halted by a sign with his name on it. Very neatly printed, in black letters on white card, unlike many of the hastily scrawled ones, or conversely, the decorated ones, intimating the person arriving had been sadly missed and a homecoming welcomed.

Someone had welcomed him like that once, a long time ago. Someone he still missed but rarely talked about. A shadow crossed his thoughts, and he pushed it aside. Thinking about his loss didn't help, except in the dark nights when he held yet another stranger's body to him, sharing his bodily warmth but little else. It helped to remember that he'd been more than a body to someone, once.

"I'm Josh Friedland."

"Sure." Josh saw a stranger, but not the suit. He couldn't mistake the carefully anonymous appearance, the featureless, neatly pressed white shirt, the plain tie. Security services. "Cristos sent me. He arrived a few days ago, and he wants to bring you up to speed."

"My luggage—"

"Is being taken care of. If you'll allow us to take you to the Skeffington estate, we can arrange for your rental car to be delivered there."

"Okay." Josh grimaced, but better he had the brief before he met the family. A spark of hope lit inside him. Perhaps they'd found Laurie already.

Outside, the heat struck him with full force, and unusually for San Francisco, no breeze. April, and already warm. In England, he'd shivered in the chill as he'd stepped from his car to the plane at Manchester Airport. Here, he slipped off the light jacket he wore and felt glad he'd worn a short-sleeved polo shirt.

A figure he knew well stood by a sleek, black car with smoked windows in the parking lot. He strode forward and shook the proffered hand warmly. "Cristos. I haven't seen you for a long time. Are you keeping well?"

"Perfectly." Cristos, immaculate as always, motioned to the open door. "Get in before the air conditioning goes off."

Josh grinned and stepped into the car. Most Floridians would shiver in this, but to Cristos, from New York, and himself, from Manchester, this weather seemed balmy, if not tropical. A glass screen separated the front of the car from the back. They were completely private here.

The leather seats creaked a little when Josh sat down, and Cristos reached for a small compartment. "A drink?"

Josh shook his head. "I've done nothing but eat, drink, sleep, and watch crappy films for the last twelve hours. That's if you don't count worrying about Laurie, which I did more of than anything else." His brother had been missing for far too long, and the thought of the people who might have captured him gave him stomach cramps. He'd faked his healing time to get over here so he could search, and it wasn't entirely fortuitous that he'd offered to meet the new owner of the club in the area where Laurie had disappeared.

The slight bump told him someone was loading his luggage into the boot—the trunk—of the car. Then the driver and the man who'd collected him walked around to the front and got in. The car started with a barely perceptible purr and glided into motion with barely a jolt.

"Isn't a Rolls-Royce a bit fancy for your taste, Cristos?"

Cristos made a face, grimacing before his patrician features settled back into their usual impassivity. "It was the only one available with the facilities I needed. I've asked for a Mercedes to replace it, but I have to be blatantly conspicuous in this thing until it arrives."

"I like it." Josh sank back into the leather cushions. "At least it's black. You can get them in all kinds of colors out here. I'm told white and pink are popular."

"Damn Californians." Cristos, an East Coast man to the tips of his carefully polished shoes, showed all his contempt in the words.

And yet he didn't seem incongruous here. Cristos, a sophisticated city man—dressed in Armani, silver hair sleekly combed back against his head—appeared incongruous nowhere. He'd worked hard at it. In his job, he needed to develop the quality, and although undoubtedly Talented, he could pass in the street as an average businessman if he wished. In fact, very few people knew precisely what Cristos's Talent consisted of. He could read minds like a Sorcerer, had the power of a vampire, but no one had seen him take blood or change his form. Shape-shifters like Josh were obligated to change their form at the full moon, usually for three days, but people had seen Cristos at these times, and he'd never once done so.

What he *was* kept the Talented community rife with speculation. What he *did* was clear. Cristos had created Department 57, the center for the Talented. If the

authorities he worked with had ever tried to interfere, he would have taken them on, but so far, despite a few close calls, it hadn't proved necessary. Some other Talented agencies around the world were private, but the ones in the public services provided access to the records vital if Talents continued to keep their secrets hidden from the world at large.

"I need something, even if you don't." Cristos opened a panel to reveal a small refrigerated compartment filled with various bottles. He found a bottle of water and opened another compartment in front of his seat to reveal a collection of cut crystal glasses, each carefully restrained by a small leather strap. "I suppose there are some compensations to using a Rolls-Royce," he admitted with a grin as he poured the drink into the glass.

Josh made himself comfortable, spreading his legs a little and stretching them out in front of him. "Tell me about Laurie." He couldn't wait any longer to hear any news.

"We haven't found him yet." Trust Cristos to know exactly what Josh needed to hear. Or didn't. He'd hoped that statement would be positive. "We're getting closer, though." Cristos took a drink.

Josh took off his sunglasses. He didn't need them anymore. Cristos knew everything about him and Laurie, and he must know how worried he was about his brother.

Cristos met his gaze straight on. "I'm sorry, Josh. We'll do our best to find him."

Josh nodded, beyond words, the lump in his throat too big to talk past.

"The last time I saw him was in New York. He brought a girl into the Department who'd attacked him on the street. A crack addict and a newly made vampire. Her mental abilities were incredibly strong. Laurie overpowered her. She believed all the nonsense about vampires, all the disinformation people have been spreading for centuries. Anyway, we took her in and found her somewhere to stay while she acclimatized. Laurie had some advertising deal for a men's cologne. After that, he disappeared."

"I spoke to him just after he'd finished the cologne deal. He called me and told me he was staying over in the States for a while. Both of us are out of the team with injuries—" He caught Cristos's skeptical glance and laughed. "Yeah, right. Like it took us more than a day or two to recover. But officially, we're out, so he had time to kill. I thought he'd met someone, and I said so, but he didn't say anything apart from 'maybe.'"

"Hmmm. That would explain why he flew across the country. Laurie always liked a pretty face."

"*Likes*, Cristos. He's not dead."

Cristos exhaled sharply. "You're sure of that?"

"Oh yeah. I'd know." The void left by Laurie's death would just about cripple him. They weren't twins, but close siblings. Their mental links went deep.

"Can you tell anything else? Can you get a fix on him?"

Josh bit his lip. "I don't know. I hope so. I always used to be able to find him. But I couldn't do it from a distance, so I needed to come closer."

"And you injured yourself, didn't you?"

He shrugged. "No big deal. I could have healed that night, but officially, I'm still off sick. It's gone now, though." He'd shape-shifted briefly the night before, just long enough to finish off the healing process. An injury couldn't usually survive the transformation, although sometimes it took longer than just one transformation. Josh had let this injury take its course, because the physios at the club might have noticed his miraculous cure, but he didn't need to keep it going now. He needed his strength for the search.

Cristos regarded him thoughtfully. "Would you have done it if Ted Maxwell had needed you?"

The reference to his manager startled Josh. He sat up and then laughed ruefully. "Probably. But only for Laurie. Not for anything else. You've guessed, then? That he's deliberately...let's say, giving the team the opportunity to lose key matches?" Cristos nodded. "It's Ted's way of moving Skeffington out. The man wants to maximize profits and asset-strip the club, so we're having a bad season. Lots of bad luck. What I did helps Ted. He leaked to the press that my injury is worse than it seemed at first. It'll bring my price down, and the price of the club. And its value. Ted and his syndicate can bid for it then."

"And you don't care?"

Josh shook his head. "No, why should I? I'll come back, if I need to. Officially, in the eyes of the world, I'm twenty-five. I should have another ten years, if I'm lucky. At least eight of them at the top. I just prove that my injury means nothing. Preferably after Skeffington's sold the club."

"About that," Cristos drawled, and Josh perked up. When Cristos appeared at his most laid back, it paid to listen most carefully. "Manchester Dons are very well managed. There doesn't seem much room for any more maximization of profits. Skeffington's family doesn't take the smallest interest in your sport, so that leaves a couple of things. He could be planning to bring soccer to the States. But people have tried that before, and it failed. We have our own football. Yours would just get in the way. And it would cost probably as much as he owns. No. Maxwell thinks he's going to asset-strip and then get out. But in order to strip, Skeffington needs the club at its peak. Nobody will buy players who aren't at their best."

Josh did nothing but nod. Cristos didn't need any more encouragement than that. His outgoing side might surprise some of his staff, but when needed, Cristos could be as forthcoming as anyone. "Have you thought it might not be the club he wants?"

Josh frowned. "You mean the ground?" He glanced out the window at the stretch of dusty highway. "He wants to sell the pitch? The Dons' ground was built on the site of a slum, but it's near enough to town to be sellable as real estate these

days.” He lifted his hand in a gesture of denial. “No, that’s not possible, Skeffington wouldn’t get nearly enough from just selling the capital assets.”

“Not the club. You.”

Shock lanced through Josh. “Me?”

“Specifically, you and Laurie.”

“Jesus!” In a flash of understanding, Josh saw what Cristos meant. Laurie had disappeared from his hotel in San Francisco. As soon as Skeffington had heard about Josh’s injury, he’d offered his hospitality for this visit. Give Josh time to recover properly. “You think he knows about us? What we are?”

“I think nothing. It might be for his stepdaughter, Kanchana.”

“I did some reading. I know he has four sons and several stepchildren, although he’s only ever taken an interest in one.”

“Skeffington has a wife, or a soon-to-be ex wife—Angelina, four sons, and his stepdaughter. Kanchana Rafiz is half Indian, from her father. Her mother’s dead and never took much interest in her when she was alive, so George Skeffington put her through school. She has diabetes, type I. How much do you want to bet he wants to find a cure? Cure his stepdaughter and maybe make a killing on the pharmaceutical market too.”

Josh groaned. “Using us.” Human based diseases didn’t survive many shape-shifts.

“Yes. By using you. He may have found something out about you, seen how fast you bounce back from injury. So he may have Laurie, and he might want you. I don’t believe in coincidence, Josh, and he stepped forward too fast when he heard about your injury.”

“And you’re sending me in?”

“I know you, Josh.” Very few people saw past the easygoing sportsman to the man underneath, but Cristos knew Josh Friedland. “If I didn’t send you in, you’d go anyway. I’d much rather you went in with support.”

“Support?”

“I’m calling in a team.”

Josh frowned. “You’ve got teams now?”

Cristos picked up his glass, smoothing his fingers over the drops of condensation on the side. He took a sip. “When necessary. The scientists are getting stronger, closer to the truth. We have abilities and Talents they could make use of, and they will take them, whatever it costs, and sell them. You want in?”

He had no choice. “Yes, I want in.”

“If I find Laurie, you’ll owe me. I will call that favor in, never doubt it.”

“I’ll find him anyway.”

“But I can make it easier. Probably quicker. I think Skeffington has a secret laboratory somewhere. Laurie isn’t the only Talent to mysteriously disappear from

this part of California. Some Talents prefer to live solitary lives, so when you go missing, unless there's a loved one to raise the alarm, it can be some time before anyone realizes you've really gone, not just taken off." He took a deep drink of water and put his glass down carefully in the slot provided in the arm of his seat. "So I started looking, and I think there are at least two others missing. Possibly more."

Cristos regarded Josh with such compassion that he nearly broke down. Knowing he had a job to do, Josh hadn't let himself think about who had taken his brother, what they might be putting Laurie through, but now it seemed clearer than ever. He wished it wasn't.

A laboratory. Somewhere, Laurie was hooked up to machines, suffering inhuman experimentation. "That's why I can't contact him. They're jamming telepathic communication." He sighed. "Okay, Cristos. Tell me what to do."

Cristos smiled, a small, tight grin. "Do what you planned to do. Go to Skeffington's, see what you can discover. In a few days the team will be in place, and I'll contact you so you can meet them. You'll need to set up deep contact."

Josh shuddered. He hated letting anyone past the barrier that hid his inner thoughts from the outer, superficial ones. He'd purposely built up a very strong telepathic barrier. He valued his privacy. But for Laurie, he would do it. He missed his brother so badly he ached with it. It made him bad tempered, unlike his usual tolerant and easygoing self. Twenty years between them—no time at all to a shape-shifter. Laurie was his only stability in his long life, the only constant. He couldn't lose him now. It was unthinkable.

He stared out the window at the road racing by the window. Normally he'd enjoy a break like this. He was far from enjoying this one.

A car waited for Josh about a mile before they reached the Skeffington estate. Josh grinned when he saw it. Perfect. A yellow Porsche 911, a real footballer's car. Due to several TV programs and press speculation, European footballers remained firmly entrenched in the public's mind as handsome, rich, and thick as pig shit. They had no taste, or so the media said. Many had fun playing up to this image, and Josh and Laurie proved no exception. Flashy sports cars fit beautifully with this image. Better than the black Ferrari Josh had originally ordered from the rental company.

He faced Cristos with a grin and shook his hand in farewell. "Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

Cristos shuddered dramatically. "Not in that thing. I'll stick with the Rolls."

Josh chuckled and stopped to thank the driver and the agent, who had transferred his luggage from the Rolls to the Porsche. It wasn't likely he'd see either of them again, but he never ignored people.

He stopped the chauffeur when he would have closed the trunk, and winked. "I'm about to turn into the public figure now, if you want to watch."

Behind him, Cristos chuckled. "It's worth seeing, boys."

Out of Josh's hand luggage came a black mesh T-shirt: outrageously sexy, absolutely the wrong thing to go visiting in. He stripped off his plain shirt and donned the mesh number. Over it went an open shirt with his club insignia on the back. He exchanged his plain pants for a pair of artfully ragged jeans and a large, studded belt. Cowboy boots and a pair of very dark sunglasses completed the ensemble. To finish, he dipped his fingertips into a tiny pot of gel and slicked his hair back, pulling a lock forward to curl over his forehead. He'd done it so many times he didn't need a mirror.

Throwing his head back and picking up a cowboy hat with a studded band, he grinned. "There you go, boys. Does this say 'look at me' hard enough?"

The chauffeur crowed with laughter. "Do you do this all the time?"

His grin broadened. "Oh yeah. The public expect it. And this time, I'm on a job for Cristos, so it's a disguise too." He closed the trunk and headed for the driver's side but paused to look over his shoulder. "Oh, and I almost forgot. It's fun."

Josh climbed in and started the engine, listening to the powerful purr for a moment before setting it into action. The Porsche might be gaudy and flashy, but it drove like a dream. Smooth, responsive. Even on these straight, boring roads, it couldn't help but perform for Josh. A mile proved nowhere near far enough to enjoy this sleek, efficient machine, and mentally Josh put aside an hour for himself, if he could spare it. Just him and the Porsche.

Not for a moment did he forget his mission: to rescue his brother. Above anything else, he had to secure Laurie's safety. He wouldn't want to go on if Laurie had gone.

And these scientists posed a serious problem. With new developments in science, their tortures had grown more refined but just as brutal as they ever were. To them, he and his kind were just creatures, subjects to be studied and discarded when all knowledge had been wrung out of them. Left to his own devices, Josh would probably have chosen to destroy the labs and the people who called themselves scientists, but he'd agreed to live a reasonably civilized life.

Sometimes he found it easier just to give in and be a griffin.

A pair of black wrought iron gates heralded the entrance to the Skeffington estate. Nothing else, no sign, not even a brass plaque, just a box at the door with a button he was forced to get out of the door to push, so the camera trained on him from above could get a good look at him.

He pressed the button, lifted his head, and grinned at the unseen watchers. It did the trick. There was something good about having one's face all over the Internet after all.

The black gates swung silently open to allow him in. He got back in the car and revved the engine, just to prove he could. The gates spooked him. He'd never liked being shut in, even if he knew he could escape whenever he wanted to.

The drive led straight to a long, low house, rather like the first floor or two of an English country house, but with an eerie singularity of design. The house

couldn't be much older than ten years, though it probably contained some choice antiques.

Good luck to them. Josh had lived long enough to know the transitory nature of possessions, and he didn't belong to the aristocracy, which jealously guarded the booty it had gathered over the centuries.

Josh couldn't altogether rid himself of the simmering rage that he knew put golden sparks around him, invisible to most people, except for a certain electric aura it gave him and others of his kind. The owner of this place might be torturing his brother now, if Cristos's intel proved correct. If true, Skeffington would suffer. Josh took a minute to calm his raging spirit.

He pulled up outside the main door to the building, judging by its size, and got out the car. He left the keys in the ignition. Gauche to do anything else. Strange how manners and customs changed over time. Fifty years ago he would have tossed the keys to the man who would stand waiting for him, but now everything ran on more silent, more invisible lines.

The great double doors of what looked like oak stood open, the gloom inside emphasized by the bright spring sunshine. Without pausing, Josh strolled inside.

He recognized the momentary gloom as one designed to temporarily blind the visitor by the transition from light into dark, but his eyes adjusted more easily than the average mortal's. A small, dark lobby led to a gateway of light, an opening into a hall of dazzling white marble, lit by an overhead skylight. A stairway swept around two sides of the hall, the black iron banisters an echo of the gates at the end of the drive, some of the motifs the same. All carefully designed. Too carefully for his liking.

Josh allowed his eyes to adjust to the brightness and saw his host, standing just in front of the staircase. A woman stood by his side. Josh smiled and strolled forward, allowing himself plenty of time to study his hosts.

Despite the warmth of the day, Skeffington wore a dark business suit, shirt, and tie. His tie was, however, a little loose at his neck, and he'd shoved his hands in his pockets, pulling them out as Josh approached and holding them up in a gesture of open friendliness. A *calculated* gesture of open friendliness. Skeffington appeared scrawny, as though he'd shrunk inside the suit, his skin loose on his throat, the skin on his hands spotted with age. For all that, he seemed fit, like a lizard in the desert, comfortable in his environment.

The woman looked very much Skeffington's junior in age. A brunette, smooth hair carefully swept back into a chignon, probably sprayed to within an inch of its life, makeup steadily applied with a sparing hand. Honey-colored skin invited a taste, despite the flawless finish. She wore a suit, a loose skirt of linen with a jacket, both in a shade Josh immediately labeled as beige. Tasteful, neutral in every sense of the word. She even wore tights or perhaps stockings. Josh's groin stirred very slightly at the thought. He'd always liked a woman in stockings, garter belt, and nothing else, and he hadn't seen one for a while. Why this carefully polished brunette Barbie should make him think that way, he couldn't imagine. Only now

did he realize it must be nearly a year since he'd taken a woman to bed. Before that, perhaps six months. Football groupies didn't do it for him.

The woman met his eyes straight on, but he couldn't see any emotion in their dark brown depths. Despite that, he thought them nice eyes. Perhaps Skeffington chose his women for their eyes. Or their skin. She had soft, silky, well-cared-for skin. Almost as though someone had put her into a car wash and buffed her until she gleamed. It took a lot of money to get that look and to get a beige outfit quite so featureless and so tasteful.

As he watched, the tip of her tongue came out and swept over her lower lip, the first sign of humanity Josh had seen in her in his endless approach across the far-too-large hall. His abdomen tightened a little more. Did she do that on purpose? Cynically, Josh guessed she did. A polished princess like her wouldn't do anything accidentally. Well, if she expected a little fun on the side while her aged boyfriend attended to his business affairs, she'd have to think again. No way would he get involved personally. No way on earth.

Josh pasted an easy smile on his face, warming it with the startled look his host cast his way when he noticed the mesh top. Always worth a flash or two of nipple to see that look, and this outfit rarely failed to provoke at least one look of disdain.

Doubled. Her gaze swept comprehensively over him, and when her attention once more went to his face, he saw her scorn. Good. They were less likely to think he held any danger at all, when in fact he formed the spearhead for two very dangerous men, Cristos and Ted Maxwell. And he could outdo both of them for sheer menace.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Josh Friedland. You have a nice place here."

"I'm glad you found it," George Skeffington said. "We could have picked you up at the airport, no trouble."

"I like to drive myself. It lets me orient-ori—get used to where I am." He deliberately stumbled on the big word. There was no harm in giving them more evidence to think of him as stupid and harmless. Although, if Cristos was right, Skeffington would know Josh as far from harmless.

George Skeffington took his hand in a cold, too-firm grip, as though proving something to himself. "I'm glad we have the opportunity to get to know you better. You're one of the stars of the team, and I want to get to know you all in time."

"Why? Why would he want to know us?"

"I don't know either." The words, spoken straight into his mind were feminine and abruptly cut off. He turned in time to see a look of pure shock in the eyes of the young woman.

A psychic, maybe a sensitive. He'd have to guard his thoughts more carefully. But if she turned out a natural, untrained psychic, she might not be aware that he could communicate, that he'd "heard" her.

He kept the easy smile on his face as Skeffington, oblivious to the telepathic exchange, spoke. "I'm afraid I have a few business interests that will prevent me spending all the time I'd like to with you, so Kanchana has offered to help. This is Kanchana, my stepdaughter."

His stepdaughter? To Josh's dismay, his cock stirred at the thought that she was available. Wife or girlfriend of Skeffington would have put her out of the picture—a spy, a honeytrap—but surely Skeffington wouldn't put his stepdaughter, the woman Cristos had told him about, in the same position?

Or would he? Josh didn't know George at all, and the more reading he did in the media, the less he felt he knew him. An entrepreneur, starting with his own small store and working up to buy company after company, George Skeffington started as an "onwards and upwards" man, but he hadn't started his life dirt-poor. He hadn't suffered any kind of tragedy that anyone could discover. Josh suspected plain and simple greed had driven the development of the Skeffington empire, but he wouldn't make any judgments. Not yet. Not until he knew more.

Perhaps his stepdaughter would prove his weak spot. Maybe Josh's attraction to her could help him with his mission.

Kanchana nodded and smiled. "Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise." He gripped her hand and found it warm, unlike Skeffington's. "I don't think I need to keep you very busy. I've hired a car, and I don't know this area very well, so I want to explore."

George's smile broadened. "Kanchana knows the area very well. She can show you any number of places."

"San Francisco is very beautiful." Actually, he knew the area a little better than he let on. He'd visited once during World War Two, on a mission for the government, when he'd had little time to explore. Later, about twenty years later to be more precise, he'd visited at the height of the hippie movement. He doubted those visits counted for much, these days. Progress changed the look and feel of cities too quickly.

"It is beautiful," George said. "That's why I settled here." The slight Texas twang in his speech told of the origins Josh had read about. Probably purposely, reminding colleagues he was a cowboy at heart, although Josh deeply doubted Skeffington had ever stood within shouting distance of a cow, unless it was dead and on a plate.

"I'm looking forward to the visit."

"How is your knee?"

"For every day, it's great, just that the pressures on the field might be too much. Not to mention the tackles and professional fouls."

"Professional fouls?" Chana sounded startled, concerned even. Josh warmed to her.

"When a player on another team knows you have a weakness, he focuses on it. If I went back this season, my knee would take a pounding it might not bear."

“God!”

He grinned. “Don’t tell me your American footballers don’t have the same thing.”

She studied him, her head slightly tilted to one side. However much she tried to present herself as Barbie perfect, inside a human being was struggling to escape. He didn’t need to enter her head to tell that; he could see it in the depths of her dark eyes. A humanity that drew him, unwilling though he felt about that. ““I’m sure they do. One of my stepbrothers was a pro, and the other is a coach, but I tend to tune out when they talk about it.”

Four brothers—she had four *big* stepbrothers to look after her. A princess indeed. But her accent sounded light and pleasing, and she smelled good.

Josh stopped himself right there. Attraction was fine; personal involvement was not. He’d entered the house with his senses wide open, taking the risk in order that Laurie could contact him, if he was anywhere near, if even slightly sentient, but when she had touched his mind, he’d shut right down. He couldn’t afford to read her as he’d planned, in case she did have some training, some idea of what she could do. Then she’d read him back.

He watched Kanchana, let his gaze linger on her breasts. He wanted to see the reactions to a definite leer. He could base his behavior on that, use their vulnerabilities against them.

She lifted her chin and stared back, but her gaze didn’t hold an invitation. When he glanced back at George, he saw nothing except a faint warmth. He found it so frustrating not to be able to probe gently at his mind, to see what was happening on the surface. Any lower and most people noticed the intrusion, right down to a definite breach of the barrier everyone had, separating their consciousness from everyone else’s, which hurt like a bitch, if done against the owner’s will.

George didn’t seem to care if Josh ogled his stepdaughter’s breasts or not. Since Josh wore the jovial, none-too-bright, high-living footballer persona, that meant that either George trusted his stepdaughter enough to make her own decisions, or he didn’t care. Or he wanted it to happen. In that case, he was no better than a pimp.

George stepped aside. “I have a few things to see to, so I hope you’ll excuse me. Kanchana will show you to your room and make sure you’re comfortable. I look forward to seeing you at dinner. We dine at eight.”

Things grew more pimp-y by the second, but Kanchana had the pampered princess look. Did George want to shelter her from the nasty world outside the estate gates?

In that case, he shouldn’t have invited the big bad wolf to step inside. Or rather, the big, bad griffin, who could prove a lot worse.

* * *

Josh thought his room over-luxurious, so much so that it verged on the tasteless. And it could have been a luxury hotel room anywhere. He saw no specific character there, none of the individual touches that made a room special. An undraped four-poster bed in the Spanish-style of heavy, dark wood vied with a large sofa by the window. An elaborate crimson carpet adorned the floor, one Josh's feet would sink into once bare. The whole house reminded him of a perfect showplace. He didn't want to leave a mark anywhere. At least, part of him thought that. The other part wanted to run amok and ruffle everything, disturb everything, make some kind of a mark on the polished perfection.

Much as he felt about the woman by his side. She moved across him to show him the bathroom, releasing a touch of scent, a smidgeon of woman under the designer perfume. Allowing himself to feel it, knowing he would never become involved with a woman as refined, perfect, and most likely spoiled as this one, he laid his hand on her shoulder when he leaned over her to look at the bathroom.

A great bath with lots of gold knobs and taps sat in a bed of red porphyry, and a large shower stall occupied one corner of the ivory tiled room. "A bath made for sharing," he murmured, and she started.

"Possibly," she said in a small, sharp voice. "But you'll have to find someone else to share it with."

A devil took him by the tail. When she would have backed off, he moved to stand behind her, catching her as she stumbled, off-balance. "Why can't it be you?" She felt delicious, firm but female, filling his arms beautifully.

She shot him a look filled with negativity. He could almost feel the ice exuding from her. "Because we've only just met. Because I'm not sure I like you. And besides, I'm five years older than you."

He chuckled. "Five years? What difference does that make? Are you sure you're not just making excuses?" He entered the persona of the identity he had labeled the Footballer. "Disliking somebody can make sex even better sometimes. Wildcat sex, you know. You can rip me up a treat, if you like. I won't tell who did it, unless you want me to."

Now the look was definitely hatred. "I respect myself more than that."

He took the wind out of her sails by saying, "I don't. As long as it feels good, I'll do it." He loved her dark eyes widening, her slim brows rising. Laying his hands flat on her waist, Josh slid them up toward her armpits. He loved the way a woman's body curved; the gentle lines lured him in. But when he bent to kiss the side of her neck, she jerked, forcing him to take a step backward to stop from falling to the floor.

Realizing she wanted to get away, using the extra reflexes his profession and his Talent gave to him, Josh stumbled and fell, pulling her down with him and twisting her to face him as he went down.

Much better. A heavy lock of hair tumbled out of the carefully constructed chignon, tickling his cheek. A good way to find out what she wanted and how clever she was. Would she give in? A token resistance?

He had his answer when her knee drove hard into his balls. “Argh!”

Shape-shifters and footballers reacted exactly the same way to a knee in the balls. They saw stars and rolled over onto their stomachs.

Whimpering with pain, he heard her voice from somewhere above him. “You touch me without my permission, and you get that. Every time. I trained as a cop, and I’ll use all that training to keep your filthy hands off me. You ask next time. And wait for me to say no.”

Lying on the floor moaning, he heard the door click shut behind her.

Chapter Three

By eight, Josh had taken a long, soothing bath, which he definitely needed after Kanchana's emphatic rejection of his move on her. Someone had delivered the rest of his luggage. While he wallowed in the huge bath, an unseen hand unpacked it for him. He'd sensed the presence in the other room, but apart from monitoring it, did nothing. Nice of Someone to bother, but he'd almost predicted it. This house seemed far more like a hotel than a real home, so why not expect room service?

He found dinner excruciating: long and formal and boring. Kanchana's stepbrothers proved very different from each other, but without his psi sense, Josh found it hard to read them. He managed a couple of them, though, sending his senses out before he dared to probe the outer level of their minds and found the typical mortal jumble of thoughts. He was pretty sure they wouldn't prove a danger to him. Skeffington and Kanchana, however, remained locked and closed. He'd need more skill to get close, or a distraction.

Pleading jet lag, Josh went to his room early. The effects of a twelve-hour flight were beginning to tell on him now, and a heavy weariness filled his body, but he had something he wanted to do before he slid between the silk sheets adorning his elaborate bed. After scanning the room for hidden bugs, sweeping his psi senses to pick anything up, he shape-shifted. At first, he took his true size; the room was big enough to take him but barely.

Strong bodied—with an eagle's wings, head, powerful beak, and vicious talons—he glowed in the dim bedroom, the fur of his lion's body gleaming in the atmospheric light. Spreading his wings, he stood before the mirror, head to one side, and flexed, easing the muscular tension that had grown heavier as the long day had gone on. He watched his image ripple in response, the powerful muscles only partially disguised by their fur and feather covering.

He only allowed himself a few minutes at his correct size—a little over ten feet high—before he reduced his shape to that of a small bird. He found it harder to cover decent distance at this size, but he only planned to quarter his immediate surroundings. He could also mask his presence by “fuzzing,” a kind of camouflage, but he felt too tired to maintain any kind of mental illusion tonight. He merely wanted to scout the area and enjoy an hour in his other form before he slept.

He left his bedroom and his bathroom windows open and slipped out, stretching out his now sparrow-sized wings, reveling in the sensation of warm air currents lifting him. A sense of ease and contentment filled him, even as he extended his senses to feel for his brother. He'd done it so often recently the action

had become almost a reflex one. Any time he thought of it, he reached out. He reached out a lot.

A small, feminine presence lodged in his mind. While he couldn't assume it was Kanchana, he strongly suspected she was sending out her feelings. Perhaps she did it when tired, unguarded. He probed further and found confirmation about the identity of the presence and her state of mind. He felt exhaustion from her and an edge of anger. Kanchana seemed to pulse annoyance, even at her most serene. He didn't yet know whether from habit, or if the emotion came from a single event or series of events, but he meant to find out. In his griffin form, the mental images appeared always clearer, more distinct, and it took less effort to use his Talents.

The night air rippled through his wing feathers in a delicious way, and tempting to hunt, an urge he hadn't experienced for a long time. Maybe he could keep the fury and worry about Laurie at bay that way, although he doubted it. He moved his attention to the estate below him.

The Skeffington estate appeared fairly conventional and angular, as though the American mind hadn't yet invented curves. His keen eyesight could pick out no weeds or extraneous vegetation in the paths and flowerbeds of the precisely laid out drives and walks in the gardens. Even in the growing dusk the pool looked so blue it could have been dyed that color.

He mentally marked three exits where he could leave the estate with the minimum of fuss—between security cameras and dark enough to conceal him—should he want to enter or leave in his human form. As a griffin, very little could keep him in.

A sharp pang of grief welled up to take him by surprise, as he wheeled and headed back for the house. All he'd known and lost, made bearable by the constant of Laurie's presence, now threatened to overwhelm him. He gave himself a shake. Fuck, he was getting maudlin. Time to sleep, or he wouldn't be of any use to anyone.

Then a cry of "*Help me!*" floated into his mind. Not a verbal cry, he was sure of it. He lifted his head, alert, and forced his senses out wide, dropped every barrier he had. And waited. And waited. Half an hour, at least, he coasted around the ground, trying to sense the presence that had edged, teased his mind. But he wanted to track Laurie so badly. Maybe he'd imagined it.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. He was tired, jet-lagged and stressed. He couldn't do any more tonight, and it was likely all in his mind, anyway.

He floated in through the open bathroom window, deciding to take another shower to ease his tired muscles before he turned in, and hit a steel pole he couldn't remember seeing earlier.

He had just enough time to recognize the pole before blackness descended and he passed out.

* * *

In her room, Chana tried to read, but her book couldn't hold her attention. She squirmed in her seat, remembering the smoldering looks their guest had thrown her during dinner. How on earth would she get through the next few weeks?

She couldn't deny his appeal for her, but she could hope it was nothing more than a desire for something different. A handsome Englishman made a change to the usual men she dated, mostly rich, mostly moving in the same circles as Skeffington. She hadn't found any time for much leisure during cop training. Perhaps she should have made time. But George had all her boyfriends checked out, and the ones he didn't approve of hadn't lasted long. She wanted to do something of her own, become her own person. She wanted a life. Was that so bad?

Something flashed past her window, an insect or a bird, drawing her attention outside, but then she heard a crash and a thump.

Dear God, that sounded as if it came from inside the house.

Chana leaped to her feet and grabbed her gun from the drawer of her bedside table before racing out of her room in the direction of the noise. All sounded quiet outside, but the crash had been heavy enough to rock the floor under her feet. She listened for any sound in the now quiet house and heard a muffled groan. Thumbing off the safety catch, Chana shoved the door open and crossed the soft carpet to the source of the sound.

Lying on the floor of his bathroom, groaning, lay Josh Friedland. It could have formed a replay of earlier events, except this time Josh was naked and she'd had nothing to do with his suffering.

Chana pushed the safety back on and put her firearm on the vanity. No danger here. At least, not that kind of danger.

She might find danger of another kind. She'd noted, as coolly as she could, that Josh was handsome, but she hadn't quite absorbed just *how* handsome. Although George's oldest son, usually known as Junior dwarfed him size-wise, Junior dwarfed everybody. Josh was actually a tall man and beautifully made. He could pose for Donatello.

The muscles stood out on his shoulders as he sat up, reaching for his foot. "Ah, God!" he moaned, rotating it in his hands. Then he saw her and stared.

Those eyes, golden brown, mesmerizing with his lightly tanned skin and gleaming blond hair, caught her full beam, and Chana felt a connection between them, electric and unique. This, whatever it was, lay between Chana Rafiz and Josh Friedland. No one else.

He broke it first. He stood up, wincing. "A wet spot on the floor. I should have put a towel down or something."

She glanced around. "The shower's dry, and the towels by the bath haven't been used since dinner."

A slow smile crept over his already handsome features. "Clever of you to notice that. I was on my way *into* the shower. I just slipped."

He was lying. No domestic in this house would dare to leave a wet spot on a bathroom floor.

But right at this moment, she couldn't make herself care. Forcing her head up, she kept her attention carefully on his face. No sense tempting herself with what she determined she wouldn't have. But naked, Josh Friedland formed a treat for the eyes. His hair, probably disordered by the fall, suited him better that way. Made him even sexier... No, she wouldn't look, wouldn't think that.

Too late. Her gaze dropped and saw exactly how well hung he was. Even limp his cock was impressive.

When she raised her eyes, she caught his, gleaming wickedly. Fuck, he'd caught her looking. Now he'd swagger.

He didn't. Instead, he smiled, slowly and thoroughly. Much more effective. Perhaps he knew that. Perhaps he didn't. In any case, she didn't think she could resist. His cock twitched, just a little bit, and it showed her she wasn't the only one feeling the attraction between them.

When he took a step forward, she didn't retreat as she should have done. When he circled her gently with his arms, she didn't resist, and when he lowered his head to hers, she accepted his kiss.

His lips caressed her gently, pressed a little firmer and lingered to taste. No tongues, no insistent grabbing; he treated her like a precious jewel.

But she wasn't precious. Diabetes didn't mean delicate.

She pushed away from him. He smiled at her, quietly. If she hadn't known better she'd have thought he wasn't the same person.

"A little more honest?" he suggested.

"In what way?"

He indicated, with a wave of his hand, her person, and she remembered. Oh dear Lord—no makeup; loose, tousled hair; and wearing her favorite comfy garment, a soft, wash-worn nightshirt, ragged at the hem, which these days only just cleared her ass.

Not good. Her resolution to keep him at a distance with immaculate makeup, clothes, and hair had just gone right out the window.

She stopped looking at him by the simple expedient of turning around. "Can't you put something on?"

His rich chuckle filled the room. "You seemed to prefer me naked."

"No, I don't. I only met you today. Cover yourself up."

She felt rather than heard him cross the room. "Okay, since you're so modest, you can look now." The short, gaudy silk robe barely covered him, and he'd belted it slackly, so any minute it might come loose, but he didn't look as if he cared. "Better?"

When she blinked, he laughed again. "I told you you'd prefer me naked." He stuck his hands in his pockets and bowed his head to study his foot. "No permanent damage, I think. My manager wouldn't be pleased."

"If you injured yourself off the field?"

"Yep. Especially if I'd broken my toe. Not good for a footballer. Broken toes can finish a career."

"You're kidding."

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Not hardly. Precision footwork, my dear."

"You *are* kidding."

He wriggled his toes experimentally. "No, I'm not." He looked up, his easygoing expression suddenly serious, intense.

"Anyway, you're okay, so I should—"

"No."

His vehemence surprised her. With her hand on the doorknob, she turned back. "You must be tired."

"Strangely, no. I should be, but I'm not. Stay and have a drink."

She shouldn't; she really shouldn't. But this Josh, as opposed to the one who'd entered the mansion, seemed interesting. The one she'd met this afternoon had been brash, stupid, and arrogant. This new Josh had an edge of vulnerability that intrigued her. Friendliness, and his new, sexy smile, attracted her far more than fancy clothes and sheer male arrogance.

"Okay, but you're not to touch me like you did earlier."

He nodded. "That kiss just now was by way of apology. I hope you can accept it."

"Maybe." She didn't entirely believe him. She'd felt desire in that kiss, heavily banked down, but there just the same. And it had done its job, increased the attraction she felt for him, made her more aware. Her skin prickled in warning.

He led the way into the bedroom, crossing the room to reveal a refrigerator and bar area hidden behind the faux closet door. He grinned at her. "Somehow I thought I'd find a minibar somewhere in this room. So like a hotel."

She snapped into hostess mode, trying to hide behind the shield once more, but it was hopeless. "You're not happy? I can find you another room if you wish."

"Would you like that? I couldn't help noticing that my room is close to yours." He paused. "Careful, I can hear your teeth grinding."

"I'm here to look after you. It's better if I'm close."

He drew the cork on a bottle of white wine, condensation beading the glass. He poured the wine and presented a glass to her without the flourish she half expected.

She took a sip. "It's the right glass."

He looked at his glass in surprise, eyebrows up. "Is it? I just chose the first ones I could find."

Why did she think he was lying? Why would he lie? Some instinct deep inside her answered, *Because he isn't everything he pretends. There's something else there, something I can't find. But I will.*

That gift she avoided using, the one that worried and upset her, nagged at her to let it loose. She could probe his mind, open herself to him, and see what she could find. She sipped her drink, enjoying the cool liquid on her tongue, giving herself time to think. But the insistent little voice wouldn't let her alone. *Feel him, read him.*

She fought the impulse. Something was wrong, but she couldn't tell what. She needed time.

An expression of disgust crossed his features. "Your father wants us to—"

She laughed at his incredulity. If George thought he could get away with it, he would probably throw her at his guests. If a different person, she'd probably take the opportunity for some casual fun.

Her stepfather's sexual morals were no better, no worse than the average Westerner, but her upbringing had included something stricter. Her mother had adopted some Indian ways after her marriage to her Hindu father, and that included a strict moral code for her child. "No, he doesn't prostitute me. He knows I can look after myself, and he wants me available for you." Her laughter increased, became slightly shrill. "No, not in that way. That is up to us, but I don't think so, do you?" She controlled her emotions with an effort, knowing her uncharacteristic nervousness with this man might lead her to unknown territory. "I act as my stepfather's hostess, a job just as much as anything on the board of directors of one of his companies. I am not paid to sleep with the guests, however, and I wouldn't agree to it if I was."

"He pays you?"

"I insist on it."

He toasted her, lifting his glass in an elegant gesture. "Good for you. But would you sleep with someone if you wanted to?"

"I might. But not on the first day."

"Or the first date?"

"We haven't had that yet."

They laughed, and something inside her relaxed. She'd found a human being under all Josh's gloss and flash, after all. She recalled the mesh shirt he'd worn earlier in the day. Undoubtedly sexy, but even an idiot would know it wasn't the right thing to wear for an initial meeting. Or did he? Did he know, or was he completely unaware?

Without stopping to think, she sent out a mental probe.

And met another probe coming the other way: sharper, harder, and more accurate than anything she could have sent. It arrived and left in an instant.

She gasped and pressed back against her seat, suddenly far too hot, even in her flimsy nightshirt.

He stood at her side before she opened her eyes. "What's wrong? Are you all right?"

"I don't know," she whispered, staring at his face. "Was it you?"

"Was what me?"

He stared at her blankly, and she forced a smile. Not him. "Sorry, I just felt faint for a moment." Perhaps it had been all in her mind. Come to think of it, her mind swam in a disturbingly familiar way. "Can you help me back to my room, please?"

"Shouldn't I have offered you wine?" She watched the guilt sweep his face. "Are you Hindu or something? Not allowed to drink?"

She smiled. "No, I'm fine. My father was Hindu, but I hardly knew him." A hybrid, mixed-race mongrel wouldn't find herself welcome in traditional Hindu society. They'd never welcomed her, and she'd left, though she'd learned some things from them.

He nodded and straightened. Only then did she realize he'd lifted her in his arms, the muscles strong under her knees and back. "No, it's okay, really," she began, but she might as well have talked to a brick wall. When he opened the door, the little juggle he had to do made her dizzier, but it was better than trying to get back to her room on her own. That deep, single probe had unnerved her more than she liked, and she felt off-balance in more ways than one. His touch made her feel weak, feminine, something she normally hated. Anything that reminded her of her illness. She fought it every day. But right now she reveled in the feeling. What was wrong with her? Dizziness overwhelmed her.

Glancing at her, he strode up the passage to her door and shoved it open with his foot. He took her through to the bedroom and laid her down. "What can I do for you?"

"My refrigerator, there are some vials and a box. Please, can you bring them?"

He hurried away and in a moment returned with what she'd asked for. She reached up and took them, pushing the capsule into the pen, clipping on a new needle and injecting the drug almost automatically.

He stood back and watched. She closed her eyes.

"You're a diabetic, right?"

She nodded, eyes still closed.

"Then you mustn't sleep until you've recovered. Just a few minutes more. Come on."

She felt an arm behind her, lifting her up. "Open your eyes, sweetheart." She wanted to tell him she felt okay, she wasn't that bad really, but she couldn't find the energy. Opening her eyes was just a token. Nothing really.

"Open."

She felt strength build deep inside her and opened her eyes. Straight into his.

They stared at each other without speaking. Then he smiled. "See? It's better with your eyes open."

Her strength increased quickly, perhaps even faster than usual, and he stacked pillows behind her so she could sit up. "Well, I did want to see your bedroom, but not like this."

"How did you know what to do?"

"You told me. Don't you remember?" He sat back on the bed, giving her space. "Feeling better?"

She nodded. "I didn't know I'd spoken aloud." She felt almost sure she hadn't said anything.

"I heard you, so you must have done. What brought this on?"

"I missed a shot. I should take a shot every day."

His eyes, his whole demeanor seemed brighter, smarter, sharper. "What the fuck made you forget?"

She bit her lip. "I didn't eat much tonight, and I'm supposed to eat regularly. Stupid of me."

"Well, now I know, I'll make damn sure you eat and take your shots when we're out. Are you sure you're up to it?"

Frowning, irritation sparking her into action, she sat up. "Yes, of course I am. I'm not ill. Just stupid for forgetting my shot. I usually carry something with me, a slice of cake in plastic wrap or a cookie, and a preloaded insulin pen. Do you know what to do?"

Smiling, he shook his head. "You'll have to tell me."

"Like I did before?"

"Just like that."

* * *

Half an hour later, Josh watched Kanchana slip into sleep and then leaned over and tucked the sheets around her. The polished society woman had gone, replaced by this far more appealing being. His protective instincts roared into action, and he had to fight against the instinct to continue holding her, shielding her. He wanted to stay to care for her, his earlier, simpler feelings of sexual attraction overlaid by something more complex. But the feel of her soft breasts against his chest when he'd carried her, the glorious length of honeyed leg, and the scent of her had roused him, and it was just as well he wore the robe, because his cock had come to full attention.

Gently he probed her mind, now it lay open to him, and found her slumber perfectly normal, no trace of the dizziness. Once he managed to slice through her defenses, her mental wave patterns puzzled him, and now he suspected something he hardly dared believe.

Instead of bludgeoning his way in, he'd inserted a powerful mental probe, scarcely larger than the small needle she'd used for her insulin. Once that had gone through, the rest of his senses could follow. Only someone with his abilities could have done this, but he didn't pride himself on it, like the person Kanchana had imagined she'd met earlier in the day. He despised himself for it. He hated prying. If they had taken Laurie with her help, then regretfully, Laurie had to come first, and he had to know if she was leading him into a trap.

Enough antagonism for Skeffington rested in her mind to assure him she didn't work in cahoots with her stepfather. She might agree to the scheme to find a cure for her illness, though. The only way she could find a cure was if someone converted her. No way would she get that. Unless they coerced Laurie into doing it. But each shape-shifter could convert only one person in their lifetime. Infinitely precious for that reason. Most shape-shifters converted their partners or saved it for someone in real need.

No, in order to cure herself, Kanchana would have to seduce someone, make someone fall for her. Someone like him.

Josh got to his feet, careful not to disturb Kanchana with an abrupt lift of mattress springs. If she'd offered sex tonight, he had no doubt he would have accepted, but he wouldn't have trusted her. Absently, he reached through the opening in his robe and stroked his erection. It felt so hard it was almost painful.

She shifted, moving the sheets. That nightshirt had become so thin with washing he could see the glow of her skin under it and the darker color of her nipples. What would they taste like? His mouth watered. Something rich and forbidden. Chocolate, black truffles, caviar. His cock hardened even further, and a bead of moisture gathered at the tip.

He couldn't understand why she should affect him like this. Pretty but not beautiful, clever but not brilliant, well-shaped without being spectacular. Just her scent, breathed in when he carried her into her room, had aroused him stronger than he'd felt in years. He'd read enough of her mind to know he liked her. Reluctantly, but he liked her.

He couldn't let himself fall for her.

He smoothed the moisture around the shiny head. It felt hot under his hand. What would it feel like with her sweet lips wrapped around it? He gasped, his arousal rising with the thought of her hair draped around his cock as she sucked and pulled at him, working him toward orgasm. They had all night, after all.

His balls hardened, tightened against his body. He couldn't hold back. Just watching her sleeping did this to him, watching those breasts rise and fall rhythmically, her lips curved in a secret smile.

He made a small sound in the back of his throat. Semen shot out of his balls, up through his cock to the end, and out, to spend itself against the silk of his robe. He wrapped the folds around it and endured, watching her all the while.

Inevitably they'd end up in bed together. He knew that now.

When sure she slept soundly, Josh let himself out of Kanchana's room and returned to his own. He picked up the secure cell phone Cristos had given him. Punching in the speed-dial, he wasn't surprised when Cristos answered on the second ring. The man never seemed to sleep.

"Cristos, I have something for your lab boys to analyze. I'll drop it off in half an hour."

He pulled a small glass vial out of his pocket and stared at it. It said *insulin*, but labels didn't always describe the contents accurately. He never trusted them.

Chapter Four

Chana's stepbrother, Junior, took Josh to meet the soccer team he coached the following afternoon, so she had a rest from his disturbingly arousing presence. One thought nagged at her all day. Had she spoken to him last night, or had the communication been mental? She knew she had an ability, an empathy, to read people, to anticipate what they were thinking or feeling, but words? Conversations? It didn't make sense. She knew she hadn't spoken aloud when she asked him to fetch her insulin. Knew it. But he'd found it and brought it to her. No way could someone else have the empathy she had. She'd read about it, when she first discovered she could dimly perceive the emotions of others. She even tried to develop the gift, but it had proved nothing but an inconvenience.

Until now.

It had happened too often for her to ignore it. He'd touched her mind—Josh Friedland had a similar gift. She had to speak to him about it just to make sure. At least, if she was wrong, if it all lay in her imagination, she wouldn't have to feel humiliated for too long. He was only here for a few weeks. Then he'd leave, and that comfortable, warm feeling she got in his presence would go with him. That evening George had arranged a dinner for Josh to meet some of his business partners, so she had to go on duty again.

Dinner with Skeffington's business acquaintances didn't form her idea of a good time.

An evening with friends in a jazz club, a few good friends for an informal dinner, even a trip to the movies would work out better for her. Perhaps she'd try for that in the next few days. Josh might enjoy a change of scene, and since it was part of her job to entertain him, she should make the effort.

If she could keep her hands off him.

For this evening, it was work all the way. She wore a gown that probably cost three months' wages for the average cop, one she did not intend to ever wear again, when she stopped acting as her stepfather's hostess. It looked too old for her, too conservative, too—everything. Of heavy sapphire satin, right up to her neck, but dipped low at the back, it had a slit to just above the knee. She had to wear it sometime, and it might as well be tonight.

She left her room. Lounging outside, obviously waiting for her, she saw Josh, resplendent in evening wear. He looked good in a tuxedo. Too good.

He gave a low whistle when he saw her. "Wow, you clean up well."

"I could say the same of you." She'd never seen him so sharply and respectably dressed. "Why do you—" She flushed, the heat rising under her skin.

"Oh baby," he murmured but then smiled his jaunty greeting and took a step toward her. "Why do I what?"

When he moved, she saw his outfit wasn't entirely suave. Under the carefully tailored tux he wore a red vest of such dazzling brightness she wondered where he'd discovered it or whom he'd bribed to produce it. Oh well, he'd heard. Better get it over with. "Why do you dress like that?"

His grin broadened. "Ah, you noticed. I like to dress up to expectations."

"Ohhh." She took another look. He wore an immaculately tailored tux, and his cufflinks, although admittedly featuring his club insignia, were discreet and solid gold by the looks of them. The only item that marred his look was the vest. Without it he'd appear simply and utterly gorgeous.

"Thank you," he murmured, but before she could ask him how he picked up on her thoughts with her mind barrier set firmly in place, he moved.

"Shall we?" He offered his arm in an old-fashioned gesture. She let him win his point and lead her downstairs to where George waited. "You're feeling better now?" he asked.

"Fine. I'm fine."

Secretly wishing she could stay with Josh, she took her place by George's side and greeted their guests. All business acquaintances and politicians, with only Junior and George's PA, Edward, present. The others had wisely taken themselves off elsewhere. When they came together to go into dinner, Josh murmured a commentary to Chana, at first scurrilous, eventually verging on the obscene. It tried all her powers of self-control not to burst into gales of laughter.

They sat down, not together, Josh between two women whose flirting verged on the outrageous, she next to two of George's business colleagues, also intent on flirting or something more serious.

To her surprise, Josh seemed to know what the women either side of him wanted to talk about, although he'd had no access to the notes Chana had made on the guests before tonight, and he flirted outrageously in the way older women enjoyed.

Only then did she realize how dangerous this man was, how absolutely charming. How sexy.

Chana loved watching Josh. His body flowed in a poetry of movement, athleticism joyfully released. Everything he did spoke of understated strength, his body a supple thing she longed to touch, to feel the muscles under his skin come into play under her palms.

Knowing she would never act on her desires, Chana let herself enjoy, although what lurked at the back of her mind was far from this civilized dinner. The thought of sweaty bodies twined together, delivering pleasure, his cock deep inside her pussy, flashed into her mind, and she enjoyed the sight, blond hair tangled with

sable-dark, tanned skin with naturally honey colored. Not until he glanced up and snared her gaze in his did she suddenly realize she lay open, her mind available to anyone who cared to read her.

She slammed the shutters down, cursing her inattention, glad no one could read her, but just as the blinds cast her mind into darkness again, warmth flooded in, so much that she closed her eyes to savor the sensation.

When she opened them, Josh was looking at her. The connection lay between them, undeniable and utterly terrifying.

Junior kept silent, unless someone wanted to talk about his subjects, either football or cars. Then he held voluble court, and his father, at his end of the table, had great difficulty shutting him up.

A pure white cloth covered the polished table in the larger dining room, decorated with silverware and hothouse flowers. Chana kept catching the tab of her zipper in the embroidered, tall-backed chair, but they did look good.

Josh's quiet self-assurance did more to pique her interest about his background. Before tonight, he'd formed an inconvenience who had become an uncomfortable presence. Now she wondered where his quiet, immaculate manners had come from.

He never tried to communicate with her except once, when the man next to her, one of George's sleaziest but richest associates, got too fresh and put his hand on her thigh. She ignored it until it began to creep up her leg, sliding under the slit in her long skirt. Her worst nightmare. She couldn't upset Mr. Smith, but she couldn't accept this either. If necessary, she would make a scene.

It became unnecessary. He pulled his hand back as if burned, with a sharp exclamation. "Good God, woman, what do you keep up there?"

When his wife—younger than Chana, aggressively blonde and stacked—turned, her carefully plucked eyebrows arched in mild query, Smith forced a smile. "I must have caught my hand on something." He held up one meaty but unmarked finger. He shrugged and pulled back his hand. "Whatever it was, it's gone now. It felt like a bee stung me."

Chana felt relieved, but also wondered. When she met Josh's eyes, for the briefest second she saw triumph etched there, and she knew for sure he'd had something to do with the incident.

After dinner, they went to the drawing room that the family never used unless they had guests. The family room downstairs was filled with comfortable chairs and sofas set in front of a large screen TV. She couldn't help thinking longingly of kicking off her high-heeled shoes and sprawling in front of the TV, instead of entering this room with its trays of petits fours and bottles of champagne, wine, and juice to the sound of Mozart played at low volume. For the first time she saw the cream carpet and ivory upholstered chairs with new eyes.

The room looked immaculate and completely lifeless. Lifestyle magazines had featured the dining room, drawing room, and a couple of others in their "Homes of

the Rich and Famous” features, but the places life really went on—the family room, the big kitchen, and the individual bedrooms—never featured. So the lifestyle magazines weren’t named right. No life went on here. Only business deals.

Josh glanced at her before three of the women surrounded him, asking him to talk because his accent sounded “so cute.” They were right, but she resented them trying to turn him into an exhibit. Although they wouldn’t have been allowed to touch exhibits the way they touched Josh.

They crowded around him, offering him a peek at anything he fancied looking at. Since their gowns were cut down to somewhere around their navels, he wouldn’t find much in his way.

Josh smiled and kept his attention above the neck. Sneaking a peek didn’t seem on his itinerary for tonight. In fact, he didn’t behave at all like his vest, more like his suit. Polite and discreet, instead of loud and vulgar, despite all the alcohol pressed on him, which he seemed to accept with little effect. Several of the men shot glances at him, admiring or otherwise, and she feared he would inadvertently make enemies.

“I’m sorry?” She’d broken the rule of a good hostess; she’d stopped listening to Mr. Smith.

“I said the visitor’s creating quite a stir.”

What could she say? Smith was old and out of shape. The only person who could compare with Josh stood across the room, talking to Skeffington—Art Simonson, a young entrepreneur, and as it happened, an ex-boyfriend. He had his back to Josh, seemingly unaffected by the footballer’s presence, but she knew from his rigid stance that Art wasn’t enjoying not being the center of female attention. Tall, dark, and handsome, but also incredibly vain, Art definitely played second fiddle tonight.

She smiled at Mr. Smith. “He certainly is.”

An arm crept around her bare waist at the back. Smith had a genius for slipping his hand inside openings in women’s garments. “Still, he’s keeping my wife busy. I swear, that woman eats credit cards for breakfast. I’m not sure I can keep her shopping habit going much longer. You can’t visualize being the next Mrs. Smith, can you?” He gave her a squeeze, bringing them much too close together for Chana’s liking. “After seeing you tonight, there’s a definite possibility.”

“Don’t you want to leave a decent interval between wives?”

He laughed uproariously, as though she’d made a joke, and used the opportunity to pull her even closer. This close, she smelled the alcohol on his breath, a mixture of brandy and wine, too sweet, too intimate. When she tried to pull away, he held her firmly. She feared bruises. Perhaps worse. She squeaked in alarm.

Josh shot a sharp glance at them. Immediately he drained his glass and murmured to his admirers, one of whom pouted fetchingly. But the pout didn’t fetch him. He handed his glass to another of his fans, who set off in the direction of the

bar, incidentally leaving a path clear for him to excuse himself and reach her with the minimum of fuss.

"Mr. Smith, you're appropriating my escort." His accent sounded clipped, perfect, and very, very English.

"I didn't know she was spoken for." Smith increased his grip.

"Only for the next few weeks," Josh assured him. "Then she's all yours."

He held his hand out, and she put hers in it.

For a few seconds, she thought she'd become the rope in a game of tug of war, but then she felt Smith's grip loosen. Josh pulled her gently free, and then, to her deep embarrassment and shock, bent and kissed the back of her hand. The soft, barely-there touch reverberated through her body. Here, surrounded by some of the wealthiest and most powerful people in California's business community, she could think only of sex.

She wanted him. He had a perfect body and that killer accent, but that wasn't the reason she wanted him. More than physical attraction, this felt like passion.

Chana felt as though the whole room watched them, although when she finally tore her gaze away from his and looked up, only the three women who'd previously held his attention and the luckless Smith were paying any attention.

He drew her to his side and tucked her hand between his arm and his body. *"I won't let him come near you again."*

Almost before she realized what she was doing, she answered him in the same way. *"I could have handled it."*

"I didn't like to see it. The man's a pig."

"A very rich pig."

He chuckled, and the sound broke the spell. She would have pulled away, but his grip on her remained firm. *"Don't be afraid. Some of us can just do this. You seem to be one of them."*

"I couldn't do it with anyone else. Why with you?"

He hesitated. *"Who knows?"* "Come and have a drink." He took her to the bar, where he hesitated over the champagne before picking up two glasses of brandy. "Drink this. You look as if you need it." He handed her a glass and silently toasted her before taking a sip from his own.

"Haven't you had enough?" She gave an inward groan, knowing she should have censored herself. She'd said too much. Now he knew she'd been watching him.

"I have a hard head," he replied, not responding to the information she'd given him. "Take a drink. How long do you have to carry on here?"

"Until most of them have gone. You can leave if you want. Say you have to get up early in the morning."

He grimaced. "No, I'll stay."

"To look after me?"

He raised a brow. "What would you say if I said yes? That you need nobody to look after you? I know that. I'm doing it for me."

"You don't need to, truly. This is my job."

"Perhaps this is mine." He wouldn't allow her to say any more but escorted her for the rest of the evening, taking no notice of the women who still approached him, trying to entice him away. Despite the old-fashioned implications, Chana felt treasured and protected. If George had done it, she'd have felt dominated and possessed. A subtle difference, but it involved choice. If she chose to leave Josh, he'd let her. George would not.

Toward the end of the evening, she did leave him, to join an old friend of Skeffington's in a game of poker for penny stakes. As she'd hoped, it drew others into the game, so she could slip away from the table on the pretext of giving up her chair for others.

By the time the last stragglers left, it was nearly three a.m., and exhaustion filled Chana. Knowing she had to get up in the morning to attend to Josh's requirements, she staggered upstairs to get to bed as quickly as possible. Only when she stood outside the door to her bedroom did she realize her stepfather hadn't even thanked her for her efforts. She remained by the door, her forehead resting on the wall, gathering her thoughts before she went inside, because she knew as soon as she took off her clothes, she'd be asleep.

A sound just behind her made her start, fully awake. "Tired?"

"Oh, I didn't hear you." Heart beating wildly, she turned to confront Josh.

He stood very close to her, so he didn't have to move to take her in his arms, except to curve them around her and urge her to lean against him instead of the wall.

"You're done in. Come on, I'll help you."

He'd changed out of his tuxedo and wore a soft robe of silk that came down to his knees. As far as she knew he wore nothing else.

She heard the catch on her door click as he opened it, and then he guided her inside.

"I'll just help you into bed. Then I'll go. I won't hit on you. Enough people have tried to do that tonight." His voice turned grim. "I hope your stepfather's paying you well for this. I wouldn't let you do this, if you were mine. Come on."

Her gown unzipped at the back, and the halter parted around her neck. Too tired to protest, she felt the gown slide down her body. When she began to pull away, he hushed her with soft words and led her to the bathroom.

She hadn't known what he intended until she heard the shower, the hard sound of water on tile. With a sinking heart, she realized her evening hadn't ended. She felt too tired to enjoy any sexual encounter she might share with Josh. Yes, she found him attractive. Yes, she would probably have ended up in bed with him sooner or later, but not tonight.

He lifted her with gentle hands, and his voice came just as gently. "No, not tonight. I'll help you get ready for bed. That's all. You're too knackered to do it for yourself. How do you take your makeup off?"

With an effort, she lifted her head and stared at him, his golden eyes clear and wakeful, watching her calmly. "Cream in the cupboard over there."

He chuckled. "Get in the shower. I'll bring the cleanser."

She did as he told her, stripping off her thong and stockings before she got in and gloried in the warm spray cleaning her body. He'd taken off the needle setting she usually used and set the temperature to pleasantly warm. He'd aimed everything at relaxing her. She felt cared for, the notion alien to her.

When he drew back the screen and got in, she didn't protest; she only wished she could stay awake enough to appreciate the toned body drawing her close. His arousal jutted against her stomach. "Ignore it," he told her. "I want you—of course I do—but that's not what this is about. Not now."

He reached for the cream and tilted her face up, stepping back so his body was out of the hot stream of water. She hadn't realized the simple action of spreading cleanser on her face could feel so enjoyable, but his gentle touch made it more than that. Despite her exhaustion, her lower body stirred, came awake, although he did nothing other than clean the makeup off her face. He reached for a handful of tissues he'd placed on the broad shelf at the end of the shower and wiped her face gently, paying special attention to her eyes, which she'd loaded with cover-up and mascara to hide her tiredness.

"Keep them closed," he murmured and steered her under the shower again, tipping her head up to receive the gentle, warm spray.

"You do that better than I do," she confessed. "Sometimes I just wash it all off with soap."

"Hmmm."

She shook her head and opened her eyes to see him pick up a bottle of shampoo.

"Turn around." He pulled her against his chest, where she rested gratefully while he pulled out all her hairpins, tossing them on the shelf. When they'd all gone, he ran his fingers through her hair, loosening its heavy weight and letting the water soak through. "You apply makeup very well. Too well."

"What does that mean?"

"It wasn't until I took it off I saw the shadows under your eyes." He rubbed shampoo through her hair.

"How much do you charge for showering women? I could employ you every day."

He chuckled. "I might be too expensive for you."

"You'd be surprised. My expense account is very large."

"Who's talking money?"

He pulled her back when she jerked away in shock, realizing just how relaxed she felt with him. How could she allow him to take her off guard like this? She'd opened to him again, let his mind soothe hers, persuade her to take part in this outrageous scene.

"Don't worry," he said as if he could read her. Of course he could. She'd just let him. "We'll talk about it another time. For now, just accept that it is. That we can communicate mentally. Your barrier is strong, so I can't read your inmost thoughts, just your outer layer. Okay?"

She nodded, relishing the sensation of his fingertips gently massaging the shampoo through her hair. He guided her head under the showerhead to rinse, then drew her close to him again, her back to his front. His cock pushed against her, and she flinched before relaxing back against him. "You'd be puzzled if it didn't happen, wouldn't you?"

Yes, she would. They were naked and relatively fit, so yes, a natural reaction when she thought about it in that way. "I'm too old for you. You shouldn't want me."

A rumble began low in his chest and erupted in a gale of laughter, but he wouldn't let her go, holding her around her waist, close to him. "You have no idea," he managed weakly. "No idea at all."

He wouldn't explain but instead reached for the body shampoo. It smelled of one of her favorite scents—vanilla—sweet but not too feminine for him to use. He disdained the sponge and washcloth, using his hands to smooth the shampoo over both of them, turning her to face him. Kneeling down, he soaped her legs, her calves, her thighs, then her pubis. That he sent thrills through her when he touched her sensitized skin was hardly his fault. He couldn't have failed to notice.

"Relax," he said. "I'd have to be a monster to take you now. Your tiredness is beating at my mind. You'll be in bed soon, I promise." He separated her labia, guided her so the water rinsed her, and just grazed her clit when he released her. A sharp jolt of arousal went through her, enervating her, but he didn't take advantage. He could, so easily.

He rinsed her thoroughly but slowly, doing nothing to break the sense of warmth and well-being suffusing her mind and body. He leaned over her to turn off the water.

"Just relax. I'll do everything. Close your eyes, sweetheart."

She did as he asked her, feeling the warmth of a soft towel draped around her shoulders. He towed her hair, then rubbed her body, all his movements cherishing, gently caring rather than arousing. "You're in complete control of your body, aren't you?"

His rich chuckle answered her. "Almost. I have to be, in my game." He lifted the towel away from her hair and then lifted her into his arms. His lips, pressing softly against hers in a featherlight kiss, hushed her small squeak of protest. She relaxed as he took her through to the bedroom and laid her against the cover,

pulling it back before lifting her to lie on the crisp ivory sheets. Before he could cover her, she gripped his wrist and opened her eyes.

He gazed at her. Only the bedside light remained on, and softened by the golden shade, his skin gleamed invitingly. "Don't go yet," she murmured. "Please stay for a while. Get into bed with me."

She didn't want to be alone. She spent every night alone. A long time had passed since she'd shared the dark hours with anyone else. Tonight she wanted company, and she no longer cared if he wanted sex in return. She'd welcome it. His toned, gorgeous body made her mouth water, he liked her, and this would be the first time she'd had a younger man in her bed.

He met her gaze honestly, and she felt him stirring in her mind, removing his presence. She didn't want that.

"I can't," he whispered, so close his breath heated her skin. "I'm at the end of my endurance." His mouth flattened in a wry grin. "I have to go, or you'll get no sleep."

"I can stay awake a little while longer."

"You need to sleep."

"Please, just get in."

He straightened and glanced around the room. "If I get into bed with you, I'll make love to you. Fuck you. Are you sure you want that?"

She smiled, weariness filling her body but the tingle in her loins still there, still insistent. "Yes. A truce, for tonight."

He let his breath out in a long sigh. "Have you any protection?"

"In the drawer."

He pulled out the drawer in the night table and found a small silver packet. Then he looked at her, his gaze roaming over her body in a way she knew he'd denied himself until now. "Last chance."

"No chance." She yanked back the covers.

His low groan told her he'd given up. He got in.

She sighed and melted against him when he pulled her into his arms and drew the covers over them both, leaving them in a cocoon of warmth. He lifted up on one elbow and bent to kiss her.

Their second kiss, in bed. My, she was easy. As his lips caressed hers, easing them apart, it seemed they'd never paused. His body felt sublime against hers, almost as if this wasn't their first time, if they'd known each other before, in another time, another place.

But they hadn't. Josh Friedland didn't form part of her world. He had no part in the boardroom tussles, the sniping, and the intricacies of California business society. It made him all the more attractive to her.

She opened her mouth to him, and he slipped his tongue inside, just the tip, sliding across her teeth to touch her tongue in greeting. When she pulled him closer,

trying to get nearer, she heard his voice in her mind. *"Easy, easy. Let me do all the work. I feel bad enough as it is, but I want you. So much."*

The packet crackled as he tucked it under the pillow, his breath heated her cheek, and his mouth did wonderful things to hers. When he drew away, he smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling a little.

She smiled back. "You don't look twenty-five."

His smile broadened. "What does twenty-five look like? Just relax. Let me touch you."

His free hand swept up her body to settle on her breast. Instead of the almost impersonal touch he'd used earlier, he rolled her nipple between thumb and forefinger before bending his head and lapping gently.

She moaned.

"Do you like that?"

"Oh, yes!" Her response came as naturally as his question, sending a spark of surprise through her.

"It's not one-way traffic, sweetheart. You feel so fucking good. Like living velvet." He drew her nipple into his mouth and sucked, stroking the sensitized flesh with his tongue before releasing it and kissing his way across to the other breast.

Slowly, he lifted his body over hers, and pressed her legs open to lie either side of his. The hair on his thighs chafed hers with a delicious sensuality. He didn't stop kissing and sucking at her breasts until she felt his cock strong between her thighs. Moisture seeped from her pussy to lubricate them with the proof that she wanted him.

He lifted up, knelt above her, the foil packet once again in his hand. Without taking his attention away from her, he opened the packet and smoothed the condom over his beautiful cock. She'd felt it in the shower, seen it. Maybe unashamed nakedness went with his job, but she'd never known anyone so comfortable with his body before.

She watched his face, only peripherally aware of his steady, gentle actions. When he finished, he took his gaze away from her face and looked down her, to where her thighs lay spread open for him. Her sex rested open; her clit pounded with need. A flush of shame coursed over her, but he wouldn't let her lift her knees or close her legs.

"I like to see where I'm going." His voice came to her in a low purr. "I haven't seen anything this inviting for a long time. You are so gorgeous. Honey. Another time I'm going to drink from you, take all this for myself."

He caressed her, insinuating his long fingers between her outer lips, gently opening and readying her for his entry. He slicked her juice over them both, rubbing her, making more. He slid a finger inside her, drew out more, brought his fingers to his mouth, and tasted her, licked every digit with a thoroughness that held hypnotic fascination. She watched him, almost dreamlike the way he moved, graceful,

deliberate. Slow. Everything he did was calm and considerate, gentle but firm in purpose.

She hadn't felt this cared for in a long time. Ever. "How do you do that?"

"What?"

"Make me feel so...wanted?"

His chuckle came again. She was learning to love that sound, a deep rumble low in his chest, very quiet, very intimate. "I want you just as much as you want me. Maybe more."

She glanced down at his erect cock. Beautifully shaped, like the rest of him, the heavy head dark through the thin latex covering.

With slow, careful movements, he came back down to her. He breached her, and she gasped and arched up to him. He slid a hand under her, around her waist, held her close for his kiss. He tasted of her, and she moaned into his mouth.

He pushed into her, careful to allow her body to accept him. No forced entry, no resistance, he'd prepared her so well.

Bliss. At the end of a long, tiring evening, was there anything better than to be cared for and then made love to?

She brought up her legs to cinch his thighs tightly, as though she never wanted to let him go.

He thrust deeply inside her, making her gasp when he touched her sweet spot. Not every man could do that, find it and then respond. His lips touched her cheek, and as he withdrew, he took her mouth in a kiss, as deep, as all-consuming as his possession below.

Inside her, he seemed larger than outside, stroking her with insistent purpose, preventing her thinking of anything but him.

"That's it," he whispered, his breath intimately close, warming her, exciting her. "Just relax. Feel me inside you, with you."

"With me," she echoed dreamily. A strange concept to her, but one she badly wanted.

"Have you always been so alone?"

She started, shocked by his perceptiveness. He pressed into her, shattering rational thought.

"I haven't thought about it much," she admitted, her words a gritted-out groan.

Slowly, steadily, he brought her up to a peak. Like the tide coming in, it seemed inevitable. She never doubted it would happen, although she didn't come for every man she'd slept with. Yes, he was right. Sometimes she'd gone to bed with a man for companionship, not for fucking. This time she knew better. Maybe it had started that way, but shit, it wasn't ending like that.

Every stroke touched the heart of her, heat radiating through her body to take her completely. He put her under his spell. She didn't care. "Don't stop."

"I won't." This time his voice sounded strained. He was reaching his own climax.

With a burst of sensation, she came. A waterfall in a forest, a sudden explosion of liquid power, exploding and cascading down endlessly, inside and out. Dimly, she realized he'd joined her, crying her name softly into the pillow by her head.

They lay together, replete, content, and Chana slowly became aware of the world around her once more. She blinked her eyes open, seeing a mass of golden hair to one side of her and the familiar contours of her bed to the other. She turned her head into his hair, still slightly damp, smelling of vanilla and him.

He turned his head and kissed her softly, sealing their union. "Thank you." Slowly, showing breathtaking control of his body, he slid to one side of her and lifted up on one elbow. "Do you like to sleep alone?"

"What makes you think that?"

His shoulders moved in a shrug, the muscles gleaming in the dim light. "Some people do."

"Do you?"

"Not particularly. I'll stay if you want me to." He lifted a hand and stroked her cheek. "You're very generous. I never meant for this to happen."

"No?"

He smiled slow and unthreatening. "No. I would have left if you hadn't asked me to stay. I'm a big boy. I'm not ruled by my cock."

She laughed. "Someone your age usually thinks of little else."

"Someone my age?" He laughed. "What do you know about that? And since when is age any indicator of maturity?" His expression turned momentarily grave. "I've seen and done things you can't imagine. Nor should you." He paused, picked up a strand of her hair, and twined it around his finger. "I came here determined to dislike Skeffington and his family."

"I guessed."

"I thought you were a rich bitch. You aren't."

She smiled. "Yes I am."

"No. I've touched you, inside and out. You're sweet, determined, and confused. I'll do my best to help you."

Frowning, she considered his words. She'd never thought about herself that way before. Confused, yes. "I don't greet all my stepfather's guests like this, you know."

He laughed. "I guessed. You're very tight—deliciously so. You haven't done this for a while, have you?"

She couldn't hide that from him. She found the feeling rather unnerving. "No, not for around a year, after I broke up with my last boyfriend. He was nice, but—" She shrugged. "Meh."

It earned her another laugh. "Yes, I've had my fair share of 'meh.' They can drag on, if you let them."

"No chance with us doing that."

"No." He rolled over, left the bed, and headed for the bathroom. She heard the toilet flush, taps run briefly, and then he came back and urged her into his arms.

"One more thing," he murmured. "Do yourself a favor and sleep in tomorrow. I have an appointment with my agent in San Francisco. Office stuff. There's nothing for you to do, so take it easy. Call me when you wake up, and we'll go from there. I'll keep my cell phone switched on, and I'll write my number down for you before I go."

She felt too tired to protest. Exhaustion swept over her, and she slept.

Chapter Five

A glowing warmth still suffused Josh when he walked into the reception area of Department 57, San Francisco, the next morning.

Very few people realized the nondescript set of offices, situated above one of the department stores in Union Square, was actually owned by the government, much less that it housed some of the most remarkable beings the world had ever seen.

Not that any of that appeared obvious. People arrived for work in the usual way, and the offices appeared like many other offices: small cubicles, each with a computer terminal and enough paper scattered around to make it seem normal. There was even the usual gaggle of people standing near the water cooler, sharing gossip, drinking coffee. One nodded at Josh as he went past, and Josh shot her a grin.

Only a Talent would recognize the mental aura of the place. Strong barriers set it apart from the rest of the community, invisible but powerful, resisting any intrusion, even replacing the vacuum the sensitive could have detected with a mundane level of office chatter and white noise. Inside, the stimulating hum alerted anyone with the least degree of psychic ability to the presence of strong Talents. This place was packed with them.

Josh felt at home here, something he could say about very few places. He strode through the office, letting his senses guide him. They led him to a small door at the far end. He knocked and went in.

Diane, Cristos's assistant, sat at the desk as though she belonged there, although her usual desk stood in New York. She glanced up and smiled. Then her glance lingered. "Hi," she said softly, sympathy in her rich voice. Diane was one of the few mortals to know everything about Talents, at least as much as her boss knew. Cristos rarely went anywhere without her. Josh smiled back with real pleasure. Diane's hair was a wonder. Straight, cut in a long bob, today she wore it blonde with pink highlights. Very, very pale blonde. The last time he saw it, it had been navy blue. "I heard about your brother. I'm really sorry."

"We'll find him," he said brusquely, unable to bear the thought of the alternative. He forced himself back to the easy tranquility he wanted. "Then they'll pay."

People didn't usually hear him say things like that. Josh kept the brutal side of his nature hidden, but it remained, as strong as ever, and where his brother was

concerned, he didn't much care who knew it. If he caught them first, they would die. It was that simple.

Keeping the easy smile on his face, he went through to the private office.

While not a mirror image of Cristos's New York office, this one held the same elements. A portable hard drive containing versions of Cristos's reference books, not the usual ones expected of a CIA Assistant Director. He'd seen that hard drive before, even used it sometimes, a traveling library of grimoires and esoteric texts. A laptop and another separate hard drive and monitor, positioned for convenience rather than aesthetic appeal on a large desk. A comfortable leather chair. A seating area for up to eight people. And Cristos himself, coming toward Josh with a smile and an outstretched hand.

He wore pale gray here, and he'd discarded his jacket, but the suit was the same immaculate cut as usual, and definitely made to measure. His shirt showed an immaculate fit around his neck, screaming custom made, and his tie, although slightly loosened, was plain, neatly tied and in place.

"Josh, the team has arrived. If you'll join them, I can brief you all."

Josh greeted him and went through the door Cristos indicated to a small board room. People sat around the large table, studying Josh with interest as he went in. He listened carefully as Cristos introduced the Talents he'd assembled to help him find his brother. He opened the outer layer of his mind, demonstrating his willingness to let them in, but kept the rest of his thoughts to himself. He had no doubt powerful minds rested in this room, so he didn't try to dominate.

"This is Fabrice Germain, a Sorcerer. He's an advertising executive working out of Toronto."

Josh nodded to a tall, blond man with startlingly blue eyes.

"Andreas Constant, vampire." A powerful looking dark man with fathomless dark eyes. Josh smiled. "Anushka Baranski, agent and shape-shifting firebird." Her hair was scarlet, her eyes, gleaming amber. She had a pointed chin, high cheekbones, and owned a slim, graceful figure. Beautiful. To his mild surprise, Josh found she didn't stir him on a visceral level. Anushka should have represented precisely his type—beautiful, graceful, fashionably dressed—but he only regarded her with interest, not desire. All his desire now centered on one person. How had that happened? When had it happened?

Cristos watched the interaction and wariness, and Josh watched him, knowing he would have to accept this. A clever tactic, mixing Talents to get the best out of each of them, reinforcing another's weakness with a strength, but shape-shifters had their own society, their own traditions. Not as much as vampires, but they'd been around as long and hadn't always mixed with each other, or other Talents.

Josh knew he was showing his anxiety more than he wanted to, but it didn't matter. All the people in this room knew why they were here, and he felt waves of sympathy, mixed with anger for the people who had taken Laurie.

"I've put some people on to tracking Laurie's last known sighting," Cristos said, taking a seat at the head of the table, where he undoubtedly belonged. "He helped us with a case in New York, then lent his apartment to Deverell Wyvern and his lady so they had somewhere safe to recover after a traumatic time. He checked in at a hotel, and that evening he met someone. I don't know her name, but I don't think the encounter was entirely sexual. I think she presented herself as though she was in some kind of trouble."

Josh sighed. "That sounds like Laurie."

"Yes." The flat agreement showed how well everyone knew Laurie's proclivities. He'd always had a partiality for a damsel in distress. "We can't find any trace of her, and of course the name and the credit cards she used at the hotel were fake."

"Naturally," the vampire commented, his lips compressing into a grim smile.

"The next day, they got a flight to San Francisco. They checked in to a hotel, and then they hired a car. That's where the paper trail finishes. I had to bring Talents in to trace him." Cristos looked at Josh. "These people were members of the last team Laurie worked with, and he let them in deep. Fabrice has used his powers to trace Laurie's last movements."

Fabrice took up the story. "I found a trace of his mental activity at the car hire place and followed. It's snuffed out, completely and suddenly, about five miles out of town."

"He was knocked out," Josh said. "He's not dead. I would know that for sure. I'm a couple of hundred years old, and Laurie's been there all my life. If he died, I'd know." He bit his lip. "I think. But I can't find him anywhere. I got one trace when I arrived in San Francisco, a fresh one, I think, but I can't be sure." That cry of "*Help me!*" Cristos sat up a little straighter. "You're the only person who's felt anything."

Josh glanced at Fabrice. A Sorcerer, capable of awesome feats, with a powerful mind that could move whole buildings if he had to. Josh kept his speculation strictly to himself, but he couldn't help remembering that the most powerful Sorcerers were virgins.

Josh put his speculation aside. As long as Fabrice had Laurie's patterns imprinted on his mind, he should have had the ability to track him. That he couldn't told them something in itself. Even with Laurie dead, Fabrice should have found him. If he was out in the open.

"It was the same day I arrived, and it was very faint. I couldn't get a direction or an indication of his condition. Just a single cry for help. He sounded weak. I'm not even positive it was Laurie, or that I'd really heard it. Even Talents get jetlag, and I'd only just arrived in LA." He couldn't keep the worry out of his voice. He didn't try. But the knock he'd received just after he'd thought he'd heard something had put the incident out of his mind.

The vampire swore. "Two vampires have disappeared in this area in the last year. Just vanished."

"I lost someone too," Anushka said. "No one close to me, but another shape-shifter, a firebird. He's not been seen for months, and his mate is frantic."

Cristos leaned forward. "It all points to a laboratory. There's something none of you know too." Something hard and dangerous entered his silver eyes. "We found a body. Buried deep. A shape-shifter, someone known to us, but not one of our operatives. A musician. His name was Valentine Roman."

Andreas growled low in his throat. "I knew him. I didn't know he'd died."

"He was murdered." A low thrum at the bottom of Cristos's voice alerted Josh to his anger. Cristos must know that in the presence of Talents he couldn't hide that. "Tortured. But in a particular way. They experimented on him. He was shot full of all kinds of drugs, including massive doses of Cephalox, so he couldn't shape-shift and cure himself. The slices and needle marks on his body were all clinical."

"Fuck." Fabrice's single word expressed the feelings of everyone in the room. "A lab. Somebody knows more than they should."

"If they know about Cephalox, they found out more than they should about other things. They have his blood and most likely his DNA too."

"The DNA won't tell them a lot." For some reason, differences between Talents and mortals didn't show up in DNA, at least not at the present level of technology. Josh didn't know enough science to understand why. It was one reason scientists were finding it so difficult to define what gave a Talent his or her gifts.

"We can assume they didn't dump him near the lab, and we can assume they know how to block our attempts at communication. That's why I've brought you people here. You all have Laurie's signature, and you're some of the most powerful of your kind." Cristos's voice returned to its clear, analytical tone, but Josh could see the way he held himself in, restrained his emotions. If Cristos ever freed his natural instincts, Josh feared for the world.

"That means," Andreas said slowly, "the Gardiners will be hunting." A powerful family of vampires, a clan with its own rules and one that considered California its particular territory. Not that vampires did anything so primitive these days. Oh no. There were just a lot of Gardiners in this part of the world; that was all. But if they got to the lab first, they'd leave nothing for the Department to analyze. Not that Josh would feel entirely sorry for that.

"That thought had occurred to me," Cristos admitted. "It's not something I could keep from the family. For sure they'll be after the killers. Will that cause you any problems, Andreas?"

The vampire shrugged. "Not really. As long as we catch the bastards and stop them doing this to anyone else, then I'm cool with it." He smiled lethally. "Having no family means all families are mine. If the missing two turn up dead, I'm hunting to kill."

"I guessed," Cristos said dryly.

Andreas chuckled, such an incongruous sound Josh stared at him in amazement. "I was just thinking that this is the strangest government department

I've ever known. Aren't you supposed to say something like, 'Don't go native on me'?"

Cristos gave him a reluctant smile. "If I have to go up against a pack of vampires who are, after all, chasing the same thing I am, I'd need my head examining. All we can do is clean up afterward."

"We do our own cleaning. We always have."

Josh lifted his head, alert, and everyone immediately looked at him.

"What is it? Can you sense him?" Cristos asked sharply.

"No." Deep in his mind something stirred. Chana had woken. "I thought so, but no, it's not Laurie."

Cristos leaned forward and picked up a clipboard from the paper. He turned the first sheet of paper over. "Now we come to George Skeffington. Tell us why you're here, Josh."

Josh sat up a little straighter. "My boss, Ted Maxwell, the manager of my football team, sent me here. Managers are powerful people in football, but he wants to be sure of what he's dealing with before he decides what to do. Skeffington bought the team, and there seems to be no obvious reason unless he's planning to asset-strip it, but he won't get much profit from that. The club is well managed; there are few opportunities for extra money. Skeffington isn't a football fan, and he has no connection with the club. No relatives, no shared finances, nothing Ted can find out. So when Skeffington suggested I came over early to meet with his people in preparation for the club's summer tour, Ted asked me to see if there was anything else I could find out. If Ted knows why Skeffington wants the club, he can work out what to do next."

"I enjoy watching football," Anushka said, her sweet voice holding hardly an accent. "Your team is one of the best in the Premiership. You and your brother aren't exactly known for intellectual activity."

Josh smiled. "No, we're not. And you're not known for wearing many clothes or staying sober." Her alter ego, as society girl and reporter for some of the more scurrilous gossip columns online and off, meant she appeared on TV occasionally.

She touched her fingers to her forehead. "Touché."

Today she wore not particularly tight jeans and an old T-shirt. She still looked gorgeous, but firebirds usually had slender forms and were graceful creatures, even in their human form. She stirred Josh not a whit, especially when he remembered Chana's soft, warm body as it had curled around his that morning, trusting in sleep.

"What does Maxwell want?" Cristos cut in.

Josh didn't have to consider that question for a minute. "He wants the club. He was on the brink of making an offer when Skeffington cut in. Ted wants to retire from management and take the chair's job instead in a couple of years."

"How does he plan to do that now?"

This time Josh hesitated. He couldn't reveal Ted's tactics, even here. What he was doing could prove actionable, if not in law, then by the governing body of the game. Not that people hadn't done it before. Oh, what the fuck. Laurie was more important than club tactics. "He's taken the team out of the European competitions and leagues, where the real money is, by putting the wrong teams in, using the wrong combinations of players in crucial matches. He's got two A teams to choose from, in effect, and he's deliberately doing it wrong, but not so wrong anyone can accuse him of incompetence or match fixing. He just makes it possible for us to lose, if you see what I mean. We're fifth in the league and still in one cup competition. Just enough to keep our reputation, but it will bring the price of the club down. We usually bring back a hell of a lot more silverware than just one cup. Manchester Dons are a serious financial investment. I'm worth around forty million pounds right now, and I'm down in the books as an asset. So when I was injured, we made out that it was worse than it actually was, and Ted said I was out for the rest of the season. That's a blow. Skeffington isn't going to like the way the value of the club goes down. If they can't see the stars, the fans won't come, and the gate takings and the sales of merchandise will plummet."

Cristos nodded, a wry smile twisting his lips. "I thought it was something like that. Well, he might get his wish. I know what he wants, and it's not too different to what we want." He leaned back and crossed his legs, resting the clipboard on one knee. "So what have Manchester Dons got that no other team has? Why did Skeffington choose you?"

He knew what Cristos was getting at, but he needed to explain it for the others. Josh shrugged. "He might want Talents." People stirred, interest rising. "I know at least two other teams with Talents. We don't use our Talents when we play."

"Any with shape-shifters?"

"No, they're not shape-shifters, though I daresay there are some somewhere." He looked up and met Cristos's eyes. Cold as steel and full of grim determination.

"Skeffington wasn't buying a team or a club," he said. "He was buying two shape-shifters. He has one, and now he wants the other. Pray God that isn't because the first one is dead."

"No." It couldn't happen. "Laurie would have got a message out to me somehow. He's not dead." He had to believe it, and he would until he saw Laurie's dead, cold body.

"Then perhaps his usefulness is at an end."

"Or perhaps he thinks he needs both of them," Fabrice put in.

"Maybe," Cristos said. "In any case, you're not going back alone. I'm sending someone in with you." He paused, glancing around the group. "It has to be Anushka."

"Why?"

"She's the only female. You're in a house full of men, and you're working on the only female in the house. I need someone to monitor the men."

Remembering the sweet, gentle love he'd made with Chana last night, Josh felt a little sick. Had Cristos planned on that? Did he now want Anushka to duplicate his efforts with the men?

Cristos shook his head, his attention still fixed on Josh. "I never ask that of any of my operatives. I want Anushka to flirt, perhaps to have dinner with George Skeffington. He seems to like young women. I need her to read him deep. He won't be on his guard with a woman. I've studied his methods, his lifestyle. He doesn't have any women working for him at a high level in his companies. His ex-wives say he doesn't regard them as people. A misogynist with a heterosexual sex drive."

"I've met a few of those," Anushka said drily. "And for the record, I wouldn't sleep with that lizard if he had a dick the size of his foot."

The laughter came as a release and a surprise. "My, my, where's the gossip-loving airhead now?" Fabrice asked, a broad smile gracing his elegant features.

"She's here. We are all chameleons, in our own way."

"Can you handle it?" asked Cristos.

Anushka nodded. "No problem. I think I can get him into a state where I can probe his mind without him noticing. But if I go with Josh, they'll think we're a couple."

"How about a casual couple? Nonexclusive?" The vampire smiled wickedly. "That can sometimes be the best kind of relationship."

"You've never been in love, my friend?" Anushka asked.

"No." The answer came short and uncompromising.

Josh frowned. "Do I have any say in this?"

"You either go in with someone or stay away," Cristos said. "It's now obvious Skeffington wants you. I want somebody to watch your back."

"Cristos, I'm a shape-shifter. I'm hundreds of years old. You think one mortal is going to beat me now?"

"He managed to capture your brother."

He couldn't argue with that.

Josh knew he could carry on alone, and with anyone but Laurie involved, he would have done it too. He wanted his affair with Chana to continue, but if he arrived back with someone as gorgeous as Anushka, she'd back off. She was too edgy already, and they had barely begun their relationship. Watching her that morning as he dressed, Josh had made up his mind that he wanted more of Chana Rafiz.

Then Cristos said something that turned everything on its axis.

"We analyzed the vial you gave us, the one you got from Miss Rafiz's room. It's not insulin, Josh. Chana Rafiz is taking Cephalox."

Chapter Six

Chana hated to admit how much she looked forward to seeing Josh again, but his tender loving made her hungry for more. She'd called him, but he'd told her to stay put; he was on his way back, the call brief because he'd already set out for the house.

When she heard the discreet purr of the powerful Porsche engine, she strolled downstairs, hoping to greet him alone, but Skeffington stood in the hall. "You're doing well with him," he said, without preamble. "I want you to do a couple more things for me."

"What? You know where I draw the line, George. I won't sleep with him on your say-so."

George didn't twitch at her frankness. He didn't even seem surprised. "That's up to you. No, nothing like that. I want him to meet with somebody in a couple of days. That's all. What's his itinerary?"

"He went to meet with his agent here in San Francisco this morning, and he didn't want me with him. He said it would be boring."

Skeffington's thin lips flattened, the only indication of his displeasure. "You should have gone in for some shopping or something. I don't want him to think we're abandoning him. He's bringing someone home with him. I don't want anyone to replace you as his guide."

"They won't," she said, unable to keep the slight smile warming her lips.

Skeffington regarded her in silence for a few seconds. "No. Well, keep it that way. Meantime, I want him to go for lunch at the Recitative the day after tomorrow. There's someone I want him to meet. Can he fit that into his schedule?"

"Who do you want him to meet?"

George looked her straight in the eye. "Nobody you know. A business colleague wants to discuss a sponsorship deal with him. Men's cologne, I think."

He was lying. George had told her to look her opponent in the eye when she lied. George wanted Josh in a certain place at a certain time. Why?

She had no time to speculate as Josh came in. She turned to greet him, but the smile froze on her face.

Josh had his arm around one of the most beautiful women Chana had ever seen. Tall, willowy, with long red hair falling in wisps to her waist, and slanted amber eyes, soft as velvet. High cheekbones, perfect skin, and perfect dress sense,

as demonstrated by her gauzy top and tight jeans. The top drifted around her body when the breeze from outside touched it, revealing that either she wore no bra at all or the skimpiest one imaginable.

By her side, she heard George swallow.

Great. Josh had brought a girlfriend home, and George wanted her. Which left Chana nowhere except out in the cold.

Devastation filled her, and when she felt Josh reaching out to her mentally, she slammed her barriers down. The only man to touch her mind had betrayed her.

Not fair. He'd promised her nothing. She'd invited him into her bed; he'd been ready to leave. She had to accept the situation and blame no one but herself. It might be normal behavior for him. She should have put her girlish dreams away years ago. She'd had a wonderful night with a caring, tender man, and she should just remember that. Not that she'd ever forget it. She showed no sign of the rejection she'd just dealt him, too practiced in hiding her emotions to reveal it.

Josh ambled forward to speak to George. "Thanks for inviting Anushka. It's greatly appreciated." He introduced her. Anushka Baranski.

When she searched her mind, Chana remembered the name easily. The last time she'd seen Anushka Baranski, she'd been narrating the red carpet arrivals of celebrities at an award ceremony. Jet-set lifestyle, exotic elegance—just the kind of person she imagined Josh Friedland would go for. And he'd just proved her supposition right.

Chana put on her best society smile and went forward to greet Anushka, hand outstretched. "I'm very pleased to meet you. I'm sure we can find you somewhere to sleep." She gave a wry smile, hoping to convey her amusement. This house had a plethora of bedroom suites, mainly used for visiting businesspeople. "The only problem is that there are no other suites where Josh is. Would you like to share with him, or should I move you both?"

"Share?" Anushka stared at Chana as though she'd gone mad. "With him? No, thank you very much. And there is no need to move his accommodation. The fault is all mine for arriving at such short notice. I shall be happy with a couch, if that is all you have, and I am quite content to return to San Francisco. I arrived this afternoon, and before I checked in at my hotel, Josh suggested I come and meet you and your stepfather. Really it is most kind, but I do not wish to put you to any trouble."

"It is no trouble at all. We're delighted to have you. In fact, it's a nice change from all the testosterone we usually have staying here." She shared a smile with George, but she got the feeling he hadn't taken her meaning. Too busy absorbing Anushka. Up close, she appeared even more gorgeous, with smooth, perfect skin and sharply chiseled features.

"Perhaps you can give Kanchana some make up and fashion hints," said Skeffington to Anushka, smiling.

Anushka glanced at Chana, her soft eyes observant but impersonal. "I don't think I am the person to do that. My appearance is mostly an accident of birth, not something I had to work for." Chana couldn't be absolutely sure that Anushka meant that as a comment about her, but she rather thought so.

A slight rebuke for a man who rarely heard them. Surprisingly, George took it in stride. "Then I may say you're stunningly beautiful?"

"Certainly. It is not of my doing. It is the way I grew."

Everyone should grow that way. Chana felt the true curl of jealousy, that anyone should have that gift. It was supremely hypocritical of her, a woman used to having money, one who'd never had to make her own living, but she would have paid a great deal to look like that.

Ridiculous, but the way George gazed at Anushka showed Chana where true power lay. Anushka had everyone enthralled, not least Josh.

Wait, Josh was looking at her, not Anushka. She smiled politely. Hostess to guest. "Did you have a good meeting?"

"I suppose so," he replied thoughtfully, regarding her in a way that made her feel uncomfortable. "I learned some things I didn't know about before."

"It sounds very mysterious." She tried for playful but didn't quite manage it. She felt too low.

His attention became more concentrated. "Is there something wrong?"

"No of course not. Why should there be?"

She turned away. His golden beauty appeared too painful, up close. She'd get over it. She always did.

Mentally going over the house plan, she came up with a room not too far away from the wing containing her and Josh's suites. That would work nicely. The fact that its delicate pink decor wouldn't do a great deal for Anushka's exotic beauty was merely a by-product. A mildly satisfying one, true, but it would have to work until this stupid ache inside went away. She'd spent the day spinning stupid, stupid dreams, when all she'd had was a night's comfort. Just comfort, no promises given or taken.

Anushka seemed delighted by her room but more interested in the bathroom, explaining that travel always made her feel dirty. "Imagine sharing that air for twelve hours."

Chana couldn't help but agree, but she wondered if Josh planned to join Anushka in the large, inviting tub that graced her suite. She didn't know him, after all. A wealthy celebrity with a great lifestyle, a man she didn't really understand, just thought she did.

Getting on with the day's chores helped. Instead of going to her room, she went downstairs to the kitchen and lost herself discussing menus with the chef.

* * *

After stripping, wrapping herself in her warmest, least sexy robe, and pinning up her hair ready for her bath, Chana found a book and sat down to read for an hour to settle herself before getting ready for dinner.

She had almost expected the knock on her door. When it came, she ignored it. He wouldn't try the door. He'd probably go away, relieved that he didn't have to try any more.

He tried the door.

She'd thought she'd locked it, but the small bolt fell back when he pushed. She should have secured it better, turned it to lock. There he stood, far too sexy, in black slacks and a white dress shirt, open at the neck. He'd left his tie undone, draped to either side.

They looked at each other, and she forced a smile. "Do you need anything?"

"Only you."

She stared at him before she wrenched her attention away, putting her book carefully over the back of the chaise longue, open at her place. "I thought that was just a pleasant way for you to spend an evening. I didn't expect anything else." Liar, she thought.

Slowly he shook his head and pushed the door gently closed with his foot. "No. More than that. For me anyway. I thought you'd be thinking things you shouldn't, so I came to see you."

"Why shouldn't I? You're a free agent. You can do as you please. Last night was...pleasant, but I never thought that gave me any rights to you."

"On the other hand, I thought it gave me certain rights, as I gave you them to you."

Her mind spinning, she tried to make sense of things. She hadn't imagined the friendly, bantering conversation at yesterday's dinner, using words she felt unable to articulate, her mind working at half speed. Josh and Anushka appeared so comfortable with each other, they seemed like old friends, old lovers.

"I thought you'd be...somewhere else."

He frowned. "That's what I meant. You thought. May I speak with you? Will you listen?"

He'd come as suppliant. She was in charge of this situation. Her space, her terms. "Sit down." She didn't move, knowing if she took her feet off the sofa and put them back on the floor, he'd sit next to her. After a moment, he sat on the small chair next to the chaise, at her feet.

"You owe me nothing. We enjoyed each other last night, and you helped me when I was feeling low. Not to say tired. I never thought that gave me any rights over you." She put herself in her best hostess mode, smooth and sophisticated.

"I did." He, on the other hand, was at his sexiest. The partially unbuttoned shirt invited her to finish off the job he'd started; his beautifully cut trousers emphasized his muscular thighs but hid his other assets, just as a good pair of

trousers should. At least from a man's point of view. She wanted to see the ridges of his cock, wanted to know if he was hard for her. "I don't know what you think I am, Chana. It makes me believe the men in your past were either shits or spineless. Did you really expect me to waltz in here, flaunting another woman?"

She said nothing and worked hard to keep any sign of the hurt she felt inside off her face. Childish, she told herself. She'd get over it.

Josh sighed heavily and pushed the fall of golden hair off his forehead, raking his fingers through the heavy mass. "If I'd even thought such a thing, I'd have warned you first. No, Anushka is what I said she was. She's a friend. That's all."

For a brief moment, he looked more than troubled, something inscrutable behind his expression. "Where did you meet her?"

He shrugged. "Some celebrity bash. I'm not sure." He glanced away. The loss of his close scrutiny came as a relief. Or it should have anyway.

"So why did you bring her back here?"

He stared at the ceiling. His mind stayed closed, but she felt a disturbance in the air between them, very short in duration but unmistakable. He was going to lie to her. "Just an impulse. I called on the landline, and your stepfather's secretary answered, so I spoke to your stepfather instead of you. He seemed keen to meet Anushka. She doesn't like hotels, so it looked like a good idea at the time."

She felt far too much for Josh to share him. No, with Josh it had to be all or nothing. At the moment, it looked like nothing. "Josh, I don't share.

"I do, sometimes. But here and now I only want you. It's the truth, Chana. I swear it."

What could she do? What could she say? She didn't know him well enough to tell for sure, and the only way open to her she'd closed herself.

"Chana, open your mind, just a little way. Read me. Find out if I'm telling the truth."

Still holding that mesmerizing, tawny gaze, she dared to lift the barriers she'd slammed down the minute she'd seen Josh with Anushka. "It's hard to believe any of this is real. Am I fooling myself?"

His mouth twitched in half smile, quickly gone again. "We can easily sort that one out. I'm going to think of something, and you tell me what it is."

Cautiously, she opened for him but only the outer layer, the superficial one. Immediately she saw a china object. "It's a vase, an urn-shaped one, decorated with piercing. I've never seen anything like this. It's creamy in color, and the piercings make it look like lace." She opened her eyes. "Is that right?"

"Perfectly. My mother loved that vase. It's from Royal Worcester, and it's quite a treasure. I have it now, at home in England."

"Your parents are dead?"

He nodded gravely. "For quite some time now, but I remember them clearly. They had Laurie and me quite late in their lives. They were content to go, when their time came."

"No other brothers and sisters?"

He hesitated. "No." He sighed heavily. "I know it's a really hard thing to ask, but please trust me a little longer. I have a lot to tell you, but I can't tell you everything, not at once."

She gazed at him, felt his sincerity in her mind, and gave in. At least for now. "Just swear to me you'll never lie about what we're doing. Don't tell me I'm the only one if I'm not."

"I swear." When he reached for her, she slid her legs off the couch so he could move on to it and take her into his arms.

She felt his relief at her acceptance, his desire for her, and his mouth came down on hers with none of the careful gentleness of last night. He pressed her lips open and surged in, taking possession as though he belonged there. As if she belonged to him.

She opened another layer to him, slightly deeper, giving him a little more.

Her mind swamped with sensation, not all of it hers.

He lifted away a little, to ask, his lips against hers, "Do we have time before dinner?"

"Time?" A second later his hand on her bare breast told her what he meant. She made a quick mental calculation. "We have about half an hour."

He lifted away and got to his feet, holding his hand out to her. "Then we'd better save time by getting in the tub now."

She smiled at his wicked grin and followed him into the bathroom. He flicked on the faucets and completed her undressing, punctuating each inch of skin he revealed with kisses, soft pecking kisses, deep, passionate ones. By the time he'd lifted his mouth from hers, they were both naked and his cock had hardened for her, pulsing against her belly. She could kiss him forever. He eased the tedium of waiting for the tub to fill with more kisses and touching her body, his big palms encompassing her body, defining her.

After switching off the water and testing it, he took her hand and held it up, like a knight escorting his lady. She laughed, blushing, and stepped in.

Josh studied the woman he wanted to protect and care for, the woman who meant far more to him than she should, and he wanted nothing else. Not yet.

He didn't give her the choice of seating arrangements, climbing in after her and sitting down, pulling her against him, between his legs. He sighed with contentment. "This feels good."

"I've never done this before. Shared a bath, I mean."

"How did you miss out on that?"

She shrugged, the movement of her shoulders rubbing against his chest. "I don't know. I just never did."

The water came up to his lower rib cage, and steam rose, wreathing them in warm mist. For a few minutes he lay back, enjoying the sensation of the hot water and Chana, enclosed in his arms, her back snugly against his chest. "This is almost enough."

"I was thinking the same thing." Her voice came as a sigh on steam. "I slept better last night than for a long time."

"I'm glad to hear it." Her weariness worried him. Every time she opened her mind to him, he felt it, beating at him with dark wings. He'd thought it a by-product of her illness, but it seemed not. Something else had caused that exhaustion in her. He'd tell her soon. But not tonight. He didn't want to disturb her right now.

He slipped his hands around her waist and rubbed her nipples, took them between finger and thumb and pinched, felt them crinkle into points. She made a small purr of contentment and pushed against his hands, driving his need up a few notches. "Are you ready for me?"

"Why don't you find out?"

He didn't need a second invitation. After slipping his hand down her smooth belly, he inserted his finger into her pussy and knew the wetness he felt had nothing to do with water and everything to do with arousal. "Oh, fuck, yes. You're ready all right."

He slid his arms around her waist and lifted her on to his lap, on to his eager cock. Slowly he lowered her, and they moaned when he slid inside her. Home. She gloved him in sensational softness and heat.

Instead of sinking on to him, she put her hands on either side of the broad edges of the tub and lifted before dropping down again.

"Oh God, sweetheart, that feels so good." He waited for her next plunge, and she didn't disappoint. It came, swift, harder than he'd expected. His gasp echoed hers, his mind awash with sensation. Never, ever, had this felt so good; not in 250 years of existence had anyone sent him so high, so fast.

He held on, forcing himself not to come until she did. It felt so good.

Another plunge, another swoosh of warm water, and he'd reached his limit. His grip on her waist firmed, preventing another drop that would have finished him.

She glanced over her shoulder, surprise in her eyes. "Is something wrong?"

"No, no," he managed and lifted her off him. "Turn around. I want to watch you come. I want to see it in your eyes. And we're not using protection." She'd feel happier, he knew, although he couldn't give her any disease.

She stood and reached for a cabinet to one side of the bath. He loved the sight, her labia peeping cheekily through her damp thighs when she bent over. She

returned to him and handed him a small packet. "One left. It's a long time since I've needed any."

He ripped the packet open and sheathed his cock. It seemed a shame. He already knew that he'd tell her soon, and then, then they could do it without barriers.

Her lashes lowered in a sultry sweep before she leaned down over him. He watched her, enjoying the sight of her body, flushed from hot water and passion. He caught a glimpse of her pussy, pink and wet, as she turned. She straddled him, remained on her knees. He pulled her closer, hands on her ass. "I love the way you feel," he murmured, stroking her backside, cupping the sweet curves. He touched her rosebud, and she flinched. She glanced down, and her eyes widened.

"You're bigger."

He smiled up at her. "Yes, I am. It's a family thing, as far as I can tell. I get bigger when I'm inside you."

"You mean it's a genetic thing?" She circled him with her hand.

"Yes," he managed through gritted teeth before watching as she united them again.

"All men should have that genetic trait."

"Some shape-shifters do that."

"What's a shape-shifter?"

He groaned, turning it into a sound of pleasure. How could he have forgotten he'd let her into his mind? Pretending to be incoherent, he didn't answer but closed his eyes and gripped her waist firmly, pulling her on to him. "I don't think anybody has ever felt as good as you."

She seemed to fit him better than he could remember anyone doing, or perhaps love did that to a man.

Fear slammed into him. No! If she knew the train his thoughts were taking, she'd back off like a spooked horse. He thrust the thought firmly behind his barriers, better built than hers, and invisible to anyone who didn't know how to look.

But it was true. He set himself to enjoying her, helping her to enjoy him. She didn't take much. He slid down a little lower, changing his angle of entry, and hit pay dirt.

Her shriek would have taken out an eardrum had he been closer to her. But he relished her cry and took the moment to enter her mind, as he'd always meant to do.

He found lots of crudely fashioned but strong doors, blocking out parts of her memory. They'd all been there a long time, nothing recent. She would notice if he broke through, and some of them seemed engrained, deeply embedded into her. It would take an expert to remove them. An expert like Fabrice Germain.

He fought to keep his mind on the job, but with her body clasping exquisitely around him, it took every bit of willpower he had.

He read her and exited, unable to hold back any longer, needing to join her in paradise. He made it and gasped as he pulsed inside her, coming hard and strong.

They shared a kiss—long, lavish, and sweet. When he swept his tongue into her mouth, she opened for him, mind and body, as though she'd always done it.

He drew away. "Do we have to go down to dinner? Do you have guests tonight?"

She shook her head. "No, it's just family and Anushka. But it would be a bit obvious if we both stayed away, wouldn't it?"

"Tell you what. I can invent a dinner date in San Francisco, a business dinner, and you'll have to attend. It would be much easier for us if we got a hotel room, wouldn't it?"

"Oh yes," she breathed. "Or we could stay at my apartment. It isn't much, comfortable but not showy."

"Either way." He dropped a kiss on her nose. "I'd like to see a place that was wholly yours. You don't keep all your stuff here, do you?"

"No. Most of it's at the apartment. The books I love, my laptop, my college notes, that kind of thing."

"Cuddly toys?"

She chuckled. "No. When I came home and found the toys missing, then I knew I'd have to keep my precious things somewhere else."

Anger arced through him. "Skeffington does that? Gets rid of the things you love?"

She shrugged. "It's his way of controlling me. Me and all his other children. I didn't realize for years that other people didn't live the same way."

He could understand that. For the first twenty years of his life, he'd thought everyone was like him, because he hadn't known any different. So for Chana, this was normal. George controlled everyone around him so carefully, provided them with what they wanted before they knew they wanted it. And he'd taken away things they became too attached to. Bastard.

"So it was living away from here that made you normal?" He grinned to show her he didn't mean it seriously.

"School and the cop training course." She picked up the soap. "We have to wash up. I'll have to hurry if we're to get downstairs on time."

"Hmm." He twisted a lock of her hair around his finger. "I love the way your hair falls heavy down your back when you wear it loose."

"Useful in certain circumstances." She shot him a mischievous look, one he relished because it meant he'd made a difference, made her feel better.

Chapter Seven

If she could have done it, she would have turned right around and left, but when she tried, the door had jammed.

Tears filling her stupid eyes, Chana made for the bathroom. The door slammed shut before she reached it. She didn't trust her voice, but if she didn't get out of here fast, she'd make a complete fool of herself.

"Let me out," she said softly.

"No. I shall go. Josh will explain," Anushka said. Absently, Chana noted the heavy Russian accent had gone, leaving Anushka with a pretty, lilting voice instead of the low throb of the sultry siren who had captured Skeffington's attention at dinner.

Of course, the model hadn't been naked then. Neither had Josh. He stood as if frozen, his eyes bugging out. "How did you get in here?"

"I opened the door," she said. "You could have locked it. Or don't you care who you hurt? Maybe you're too arrogant to care? I told you I didn't share, and I meant it. Now let me go." For a minute there, she'd nearly lost it, but she kept an iron control on her features, on her feelings. One good cry should let this bastard out of her system. Perhaps two. But she needed to get back to her room and quickly before she collapsed right here.

"Don't go, Anushka. We need to show her what we are, why we're here. She might not believe it if it's just me." He sounded calm, in control, but she caught the slight waver, a sign he might feel a little bit affected. Well, good. He deserved more than that. He deserved a good kicking, and for a second or two she thought about going to find Junior. Having a stepbrother the size of a house sometimes had advantages.

Neither Anushka nor Josh seemed at all put out by their nakedness when she'd entered the room. As if they weren't doing anything wrong, or were used to being naked with each other. Perhaps this didn't count as betrayal in his world. Well, it did in hers. She lifted her chin. He'd just lost the opportunity to have a wild affair with the best thing that had ever happened to him, she told herself. Later she could collapse, give way to all the doubts pressing on her heart, but not now.

She felt strong enough to look at him. Even now, his lithe, sinewy body sent waves of heat through her, and she hated herself for the automatic reaction. And that someone else stood here to witness it. Starlight glinted through the open window, a mockery of the romantic rush she'd felt when she'd headed for his room.

"Very well." Anushka moved forward so she stood close to Josh, but she didn't touch him. Thank God.

"Watch." The commandment held an underlying urge in it, a trick she'd used herself a time or two. Fury rose in her, that he would use that on her. But she didn't look away as Anushka stretched out one slender arm and glanced at Josh.

Feathers sprouted along the arm, red and gleaming in the dim light of the bedside lamps. Chana blinked. She must be seeing things.

Josh held his arm out, and she saw feathers too, growing into wings along his back. She'd seen a film once where the transformation took place, the result of CGI. She must be lying in bed and dreaming. Relief flooded her when she realized this was all a bad dream. Okay; fine. She'd tell Josh all about it when she woke up. God knew she'd felt tired recently. That must be it.

Since she was definitely dreaming, she could lean back and enjoy the show. Almost separate from her body now, she watched as feathers and fur sprouted over their bodies. Anushka seemed to stretch her neck and grow a slender beak. Everything about the woman, whether human or bird, came out elegant. God, she hated that.

Josh fell forward to his hands...paws. Big, golden paws covered with a plush fur. His body strengthened, furred over, and wings sprouted from his chest...flanks. His head shortened, sharpened, and he too grew a beak, a vicious hooked thing that could rip through flesh and bone without thought. He looked like nothing she'd ever seen before, half mammal, half bird. Four limbs, front and back paws, wings folded against a powerful body, and the head of a great bird. He lifted his head and tilted it to one side.

Chana received a nasty shock. His eyes looked more like a bird's eyes—domed, clear, sharp with speculation—but inside she saw Josh's golden lights, the spark of the man she...liked. Or had liked. When she woke up, she'd like him still, but the dream might make her wonder. She'd had vivid dreams before, dreams of transformation she'd dismissed as the result of her overactive imagination.

"It's me. Whatever form I take it's always me."

Anushka's soft laughter washed over her mind. *"This is what we were doing, dubchik, nothing else, I promise."*

Enough. Josh's voice sliced hard and clean through her mind, and she watched dreamily as they changed back.

Anushka bent and picked up a robe off the floor, shrugging into its lavender folds. "I will leave you now. The best of luck, *zaychik*. Tell her everything and call me if you need me." She strolled across the room and left, the door opening as if never locked.

"It wasn't locked. I just gave you the impression that it was." Josh's voice had never sounded so soft, so sweet.

"Will I wake up soon?"

He crossed the room to her, gloriously naked, and she couldn't resist reaching up a hand to touch him. Warm, welcoming. Even touch felt intact in this dream. She snatched her hand away. Half of him wasn't enough. "Nakedness to my kind is natural. Wearing clothes when you shape-shift could turn out very expensive, so we're used to it. Like naturists, it's nothing to us. Please, Chana, listen to me." His voice, softly pleading, persuaded her to listen. After all, what harm could listening do? "I'm a one-woman man. One at a time, that is, and you're it. If you don't want me, say so, but I want you, and I swear I won't cheat on you. Haven't cheated on you."

How did she know? How could she tell?

As if she'd spoken the words, he answered her. "You already know we can speak mind to mind. You must know we can't lie like that. We can only block, stop the reader from seeing too much. Well then, I'm open to you. Everything is there now, Chana. Read me. Please."

Softly, she entered his mind. She looked carefully at his aura, noted the lack of deceit, and went deeper, and deeper still. Everywhere she probed, he gave way, and she saw no doors. He was telling the truth. "Chana, this is strange to you, crazy, but believe me, please. Judge later. For now just read me and know I'm telling the truth."

She gave a short nod. She couldn't find any lies in him, and when she probed his libido, she saw his lack of desire for the beautiful Russian, together with his astonishment that he didn't want such a lovely creature. That convinced her most of all.

"You're not dreaming, Chana. Up until now you have been, but this is real." Bending, he picked her up and crossed the room to where the couch sat before the window. He sat and settled her on his lap, his arm firmly around her. She sat limply, trying to take it all in. "This is what I am, what Anushka is. We were together because the moon is full, and we have to shape-shift during the full moon. Once a day for the three days when the moon is at its fullest. It's a compulsion for shape-shifters, something we can't avoid. Except one way." His expression grew grim.

"No." She pressed her face against his chest, too tired to push herself away, reality catching up with her. "I'll wake up soon."

"You are awake." She felt his fingers under her chin, urging her to look at him. He regarded her closely, a small, worried frown between his brows. "Chana, listen to me. We'd agreed to tell you, but not like this. You weren't supposed to see that until you were ready, but if I hadn't showed you, you'd have refused to believe me. I'm a shape-shifter, Chana. There are others like me. We exist. We hide ourselves away."

"Why?" The blessed feeling of disembodiment disappeared, leaving her frustrated, angry, and confused. Not possible? She'd had dreams all her life, dreams of changing, of flying, but that wasn't true. It couldn't be. Lots of people had dreams of flying.

How could he hide this from her? Why would he want to?

"Because we are sought out and made to be different, when most of us would rather live our lives in peace. Because they think they can experiment on us, somehow distill our essence, and use it. Because they hate us and fear us and seek to kill us. All of those things."

Her mind raced to accept what she'd heard. But she'd seen it for herself, and he was right. This was no dream.

She closed her eyes. "Why are you telling me this? Why do I have to know these things?"

He sighed and didn't answer, threading his fingers into her hair. He stroked her, and she opened her eyes, afraid he'd suddenly transform into the...creature. "What was that thing?"

"That thing was me. I'm a griffin." He watched her carefully, holding her as though she were made of glass. "Every month at the full moon I have to change into my other form. If I lived as a griffin, I'd have to take my human form at that time of the month."

"How—how do you manage?"

"I was born that way." He heaved a sigh. "I think you're the same as me."

"A griffin?"

He grunted assent. "Maybe. Or something else. You're some kind of shape-shifter anyway."

Her laugh came out high-pitched, forced. "Now you're teasing me." Definitely la-la land.

"No, no I'm not, sweeting. I have proof, of a sort anyway."

She turned in to his warmth, refusing to believe his nonsense. "You can't possibly have proof. I've never done what you've just done. I've never shape-shifted."

"No, they wouldn't let you."

If she hadn't seen it, the transformation, she wouldn't have believed anything. She balled her fist and thumped his chest, hearing his gasp with secret pleasure. He'd hurt her, so this was only payback, after all. "It's stupid."

"Perhaps it is. But it's my life, what I am, and if you want me you have to understand that."

His turn to take her breath away. He might as well have hit her, she felt so helpless. "It—it's not as though we know each other very well. Want you how?"

"With me," he said simply. He drew back a little so he could look into her face. "A couple."

She laughed shakily. "After two days?"

"Yeah." His voice deepened, gained a rough edge. "You opened to me like nobody else ever has. I've read you, let you read me." He cleared his throat

nervously. "Well, nearly all of me. I had to keep parts hidden. You understand, don't you?"

She frowned up at him doubtfully. "I guess." She did feel closer to Josh than she had to anyone else. She might even be falling for him in a big way, although she still remained slightly unconvinced. And with the new revelation he'd given her, she doubted it even more.

He bent his head and kissed her, just touching his lips to hers. Then he held her. Just held her safe while she thought.

She sat on his lap, remembering, thinking, trying to remember the things that lay hidden in her life. She couldn't remember her mother very well, try as hard as she might, and she should recall something. She couldn't remember much from her childhood. Had she lived around these creatures sometime? Was that why his telling her sounded more like the truth than anything else she'd learned?

"Tell me everything." She couldn't bear not knowing. She had to know.

He sighed and studied her face. After a moment, his gaze cleared and his shoulders straightened. "You have to promise to keep your mind open to me while I tell you. I want to know your reactions, and I don't want to go too far. Agreed?"

She took less time than he did to make her mind up. "Okay." He'd seen all he wanted to see, anyway. Mind and body.

He lifted her a little, shifting her position on his lap so he could watch her while he told her. A gentle warmth seeped into her mind. He'd opened to her too. "This is amazing."

He kissed her. Long, sweet, and deep, caressing her mouth with his in exquisite slo-mo. Maybe she'd give up and let him tell her another day. No, she couldn't. This news concerned her directly. She had to know.

"Do you often feel disembodied, floating? Have you ever felt you know what it's like to fly? How about a secret, one you can't quite touch?"

"Hey, what is this, twenty questions? Or do you moonlight for a teen magazine?"

He laughed outright. "I was trying to see if you'd had any idea of any of this."

"Yes, yes, and yes. Now get on with it."

Now he'd started to tell her, she couldn't bear for him to stop or play stupid games.

He took a deep breath. "When a shape-shifter doesn't want to shape-shift during the full moon, or it's inconvenient for him, there's a drug available to take. I mean, just think if you were an astronaut, it would be a bit more than inconvenient to have to shape-shift in orbit."

She chuckled. "I can see that."

"The drug's name is Cephalox. Scientists extracted it from a natural herb about a hundred years ago. Trouble is, Cephalox isn't the nicest of drugs. Think of it as the shape-shifter's heroin. Three doses and you're addicted, although there are

some people who never get addicted and others get hooked after the first dose. Eventually it'll kill you, but if you're careful with it, use it in measured doses, it can take a long time. Some people are lucky and get addicted, but build up a tolerance."

"It doesn't sound like something I'd like to get involved with."

"Yeah." He lifted her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles, keeping hold of it when he'd done. "You take insulin, don't you?"

"It's the diabetes. It's pretty much under control now, but I have to have the injections."

"You've been taking it how long?"

She thought back. "Since I was thirteen. I had a couple of fainting spells, and they studied it and discovered I have type one diabetes."

"Who did the diagnosis?" His grip on her hand increased just a little.

She frowned. "Why do you need to know? Where's this taking us?" Seeing the determined look on his face, she relented. "Our family doctor. Dr. Speed. He has an office in San Francisco, but mostly he comes to us. If we need medical treatment, we go into the private wing of the local hospital. So far, I've only been in for my diabetes, when it needed stabilizing. Why?" His expression was making her uncomfortable. She'd thought him easygoing, but he looked far from that now.

"Chana, I took a vial of your insulin and got it analyzed. You're not taking insulin. You're taking Cephalox."

Chapter Eight

“What? What are you talking about?” She jumped to her feet, taking a few short strides away from him. “Why? How?”

She turned back to face him. He sat, stark-naked, one ankle resting on a knee, watching her, that grim expression still in place. “There’s only one reason to take Cephalox, Chana. It only does one thing. It stops the shape-shifter changing form.”

He got to his feet and took the two steps to her side. “You’re a shape-shifter, Chana.”

“No.” When she gave a small sound of anguish, he drew her closer, into his arms. She wept into his chest, unable to prevent her tears, caused by anger rather than anything else. “How could I be? Wouldn’t I know? How could this happen?”

He spoke into her hair, softly, his tone so measured she knew he was holding his own emotions in control. For her sake. “George is human, not a Talent. There are two ways to become a shape-shifter. One is a turning ritual, something partners do when one is a shape-shifter and one is not. The other is to be born that way. That means one or other of your parents had to be a shape-shifter.” He paused, pressing a soft kiss into her hair. “Tell me about your parents.”

She lifted her chin and gazed at him. Thoughts filling her head. “I don’t remember my father at all. He died when I was a child. My mother brought me up alone until she met and married George. She died just before I realized I had diabetes. I collapsed, and they took me to the hospital, and she died while I was still there. A diabetic coma, I was told. I’m her only child.”

She showed him the picture of her mother by visualizing it. She had one good photo, and she’d spent hours gazing at it, wondering what it would be like to have someone who loved her, really loved her, so she knew the picture very well. Her mother had been a redhead with soft brown eyes, an artist from Los Angeles, moderately well-off. Chana had her jewelry but little else to remember her by. “I don’t recall much. I know I should remember more, but I don’t. Maybe it’s that I was taken so ill. I nearly died, and the doctor told me that some of my memory went then.”

“Shape-shifters tend to travel light,” he explained. “Some put down roots, but it’s easier not to. She must have been a shape-shifter, or your father was, or they both were. If you have a picture you can spare and her details, we can investigate her, see who she really was, where she came from.”

“George said she was an orphan, with no close relatives.”

He opened his fist over her back, holding her close. The heat radiated off his body, making her feel strangely safe. "I'll make a few calls. I should go in."

"Go in where?"

He hesitated, looked away before returning his gaze to her. "Department 57. We have resources we can call on. It's a government department for Talents."

Her eyes widened. "You're an agent?"

He chuckled. "No, just a consultant. I help them sometimes, and it's a resource Talents can call on. Now I have more at stake."

His expression darkened, and a somberness she didn't associate with him dropped over his features. She'd happened on something serious. "What is it? What's at stake?"

"They've got Laurie."

The three words dropped into the stillness of the room reverberated in her head. She'd done her homework: Laurie Friedland, Josh's brother and teammate. The brothers were very close.

"Who have?"

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "We have enemies. We think scientists have taken Laurie to experiment on him. Several Talents have disappeared from this area over the last few years, but until recently the pattern wasn't obvious."

"Is that why you came?"

He nodded. "Laurie disappeared in this area a month ago. It's not like him. Whatever he's doing, he touches base with me every so often, and I can feel him, sense his presence. Now all I can feel is that he's not dead, and I don't know if that's me imagining things or if it's really true." He met her gaze squarely, but she didn't need to look into his eyes to feel the misery pulsating through him. "We've always been together. Nothing's constant in my life except for him. I can't imagine him not being there, and I need to get to him before they hurt him too badly."

"How come you can't sense him? I'm new to all this, but you're incredibly powerful, aren't you?"

He shook his head. "They must be holding him in a shielded facility. Lined in lead or silver most probably, perhaps sonically protected. That's very expensive to do, so we're looking for money."

Her throat went dry. "My stepfather."

He shrugged. "Maybe. Probably. That's not why I came here. That was the football thing. Ted Maxwell wants to know why your stepfather chose to buy Manchester Dons. We're one of the best-managed clubs in the Premiership. There's not a lot of financial slack. If he'd wanted a quick killing, there are plenty of clubs that would have been better for him. So Ted is worried too. When I got here, Cristos met me off the plane. He's been keeping tabs on your stepfather for a while, and he

thinks he has something to do with Laurie's disappearance." He paused. "Cristos runs the Department."

Something else occurred to her. "Then I'm not diabetic?"

He smiled gently. "It's highly unlikely. The only thing the lab found in those insulin vials was Cephalox, and since type one diabetics generally need insulin—no, you're not diabetic."

Wild hope surged through her at the thought. While she coped well enough with her condition, she'd never allowed herself to dream about getting clear of it. Something that could never come true. Well now it had come true. "For real?"

"Oh yes. For real."

His lips came down on hers, and this time passion burned away the tenderness. The need she sensed in him fed off the joy in her own heart. The information that Skeffington was using her didn't come as a revelation to her, so it didn't surprise or shock her, but the fact of her total health filled her with a wild elation she wanted to celebrate.

And Josh wanted to help her.

Chana wasn't quite sure how they got across the room to the bed, but they ended up rolling across its broad expanse while Josh removed her clothes, shoving them aside as he took off each piece, laughing at her mock squeals of protest. Then he was in her, for that moment of still, soaring perfection that amazed her every time.

She pushed him, and he allowed it, rolling onto his back close to the edge of the bed. Shoving up against his shoulders brought her into a sitting position, her legs on either side of his hips. He gazed up at her, warmth and, yes, love, in his gaze. "You're spectacular," he said, but his head jerked back when she drove her body down as hard as she could on to his growing cock. She loved the way it swelled inside her, and while she wanted to see its full size, no way would she let his body leave hers any time in the near future. It felt too damned good. She saw the ring of latex, wondered when he'd sheathed himself, and decided she didn't care, that she'd take him any way, with or without protection.

Driving him hard, riding him toward the ultimate, Chana forgot her own body. She entered his mind, feeling him embrace her hungrily, wanting more, always more. And she was just the person to give it to him.

Her legs worked, she felt her muscles taut against his thighs, pushing, feeling him holding himself tight for her, but she retained control. She was doing him and loving every second of it.

"Oh God, Chana, I'm in so deep I swear I can feel your heart beating."

She laughed shakily. "Along with the rest of me." A slow, deep throb swelled out from the center of her being, pulsing along veins, nerves, muscles, reaching every part of her. She threw back her head and cried out, long and loud, and heard his corresponding call. He gasped her name, just once, then flooded her with heat, from his mind and body. She stretched out and felt him grasp her arms before the

pulses died away. She fell forward, his arms going around her in a fiercely protective hug.

She had no idea how long they lay together, just being, but she'd never felt so submerged in somebody else, so completely part of another person. "This is new to me," she whispered against his chest.

"Me too," he confessed.

She lifted herself up on her elbows and looked at him, into the face already so dear to her. "Well, since I have a few years on you..." she began, then realized something else. "You're not really twenty-five, are you?"

"According to the press I am." He gave her a one-sided grin, very pleased with himself. "No, we live a little longer than mortals."

"Mortals?"

"Human beings, *Homo sapiens*, mortals. A bit inaccurate, since we're mortal too, but we've been using the term too long to go back now."

"So you're a different species?"

He lifted a finger and stroked the side of her face. "Not really. More a different subspecies. Look, you have different breeds of cats and dogs, why not humans? I'm a shape-shifter. Then there are vampires, anthros—"

"*Vampires*? They exist? And what's an anthro?"

"Anthropomorphs. Half-and-halves like centaurs and merpeople. Yes, there are such things as vampires, but they're not like you imagine. To put people off the trail, the vamps themselves have spread a lot of the legends. You'll meet one tomorrow, if you agree to come with me."

"Where?"

"To Department 57's San Francisco office. I want to take you in, introduce you to a few people. I think someone might be able to help you."

"Help me how?"

He spread a hand over her back and stroked her spine while he talked. "There are blocks in your mind. If I try to release them for you, it would be like taking a sledgehammer to a door. It'll work, but it will hurt. I don't want that for you. You've been through enough already. But I know people who can release the blocks for you without hurting you, a bit like picking a lock. You need them opened."

"Blocks?"

"Crude but effective. My guess is your memories of your mother, perhaps some of the things she told you have been blocked. Perhaps you learned more than you thought, at some point, and that might be blocked too."

Alarm flared, but his touch soothed it away. "How could they do that?"

He kept his voice low and gentle. "Hypnotism can do it. That would explain why they're so crude. Hypnotism is a bit of a blunt weapon. You can keep the blocks, if you want to. But you have to come off the Cephalox." His voice hardened slightly. "It could be damaging. You've been taking it far too long already."

She wanted nothing more to do with the stuff. "I want to come off it." Heartened by a new thought, she brightened. "Does this mean I can have chocolate?"

His laugh shook her body deliciously. "Oh yes. Let me get it for you. How about éclairs tomorrow?"

Her mouth watered. She'd seen them, supervised their preparation in her French cookery class, but never, ever tasted one. Chocolate covered, oozing with cream, completely sinful. A thought flashed through her mind. Other things could be covered with chocolate. And licked off too.

A low groan from Josh reminded her their minds were still linked, and a stirring below reminded her of something else. "You're still inside me."

"So I am."

She laughed, but moaned softly when he thrust up, into her. A few minutes later she gazed down at him, oblivious to anything else but Josh.

Chapter Nine

In San Francisco the next day, Josh took her for lunch and ordered chocolate mousse. Nothing else, just the dessert she'd craved nearly all her life. Before her diagnosis she'd loved the sweet, and she'd missed it the most when she'd gone on the diet prescribed for diabetics. After the first mouthful, Chana decided this was as close to heaven as she wanted to get. Josh picked at a side salad while he watched her.

After the first serving, Chana discovered what people meant when they called the dish "rich." She pushed the second half-finished cup away with a regretful sigh. "If I have any more, I'll be sick."

He toasted her with his wineglass. "You can have more later." He checked his watch. "I said we'd be in the office sometime around two, and it's one fifteen now."

He ordered coffee, evidently enjoying the ambience of the small, unpretentious restaurant she'd guided him to. "It's nice not to be mobbed everywhere."

"Are you?"

He chuckled at her surprise. "I'm a football star, Chana, playing for one of the top clubs in the Premiership. I play for my country. Yes, everywhere but here, I'm mobbed. I love Manchester and my home in Alderley Edge, but I'm recognized all the time."

"So how do you manage?" She picked up her spoon and traced a pattern in the foam on her cappuccino. "You said you were...older than twenty-five. What happens when you get old?"

"Ah." He glanced around, but no one sat at the tables near theirs. The furtive look didn't suit him, but she understood why he did it. "We go on. That's why we need government help. They don't exactly know what they're doing, but we can generate the paperwork. I can look old, but I don't exactly age. I just move on. Before this, I was my uncle." He grinned when she frowned at him. "Josh Friedland the footballer was named after his uncle, who died age fifty of a heart attack. You can change your appearance a bit, or rather, change the way people see you. It's like fuzzing to disguise your other form. The rest is smoke and mirrors. False papers, false memories, but not too many. It'll get both more difficult and easier. Difficult because of the electronic records that exist, easier because we can put a flood of stuff into the system and people rarely notice. See what I mean?"

"Yes." She eyed the half-finished cup of mousse regretfully before finishing her cappuccino. "So how old are you?"

“Two hundred and fifty, give or take a year or two.”

Chana choked on her last mouthful. Josh reached for her, but she’d recovered by the time his alarm had escalated. “You’re joking.”

“You did ask. Don’t worry about it. I don’t mind dating a younger woman.”

Reminded of her unease when she’d realized Josh was five years her junior, she had to smile. “But you’ll always be younger than me as far as the press is concerned.”

His grin broadened. “That just makes it sweeter. Look, Chana, I really don’t want this to end any time soon, but if you want me to walk away after we’ve helped you and I’ve found Laurie, I’ll understand.”

“You don’t want it to end?” The thought of him leaving her choked her more than the coffee had. “I want it too. I mean—”

He caught her hand in his. “Don’t say any more. Not yet. Let’s get this mess sorted out first, okay?”

She stared into his eyes for a moment out of time and then smiled. “Okay.”

He paid the bill, and they left. Outside, where their car waited, Josh tossed a tip to the valet and helped Chana in. The drive to the Department was short. When they pulled into the underground parking lot and found a space, she asked, “Are we going shopping?”

He laughed. “You never look up? Most of these stores have offices above them.”

The elevator had a panel, which Josh opened with a keycard, giving them access to the upper floors. Even then, they underwent more checks, a standard security check, and then Chana felt an impersonal touch in her mind. Before she slammed her barrier down, Josh touched her arm. “Let them. You won’t get in otherwise.”

The touch retreated, and the official allowed them to go forward. Laser barriers hummed into place after they’d passed through.

They entered what looked like a normal open office, filled with standard cubicles. Josh led her to a room at the end, and through to a small, private office where a woman with the most incredible hair Chana’d ever seen looked up from her computer and smiled. “Go straight through,” she said in a New York accent. “They’re waiting for you.”

“Ah. Have they been waiting long?”

“Nah.”

“I liked the pink hair best,” he murmured as they passed by her desk.

The woman smiled, not put out at all. “I thought this was a nice green. ‘Leaf green’ they called it at the salon.”

Josh didn’t venture to comment further but stepped back to let Chana go through the entry first.

The double doors led to what looked like a standard boardroom, not as fancy as the ones George used, but reasonably well furnished with a white table and chairs and soft lighting.

A tall, middle-aged man came forward to greet them. She'd learned to assess clothes at a glance, and this sense told her he wore Armani. Discreet, charcoal gray, and completely immaculate. The man looked as though he never sat down, the pants creaseless, but a superb cut could do that. He smiled, and it reached his eyes, which gleamed silver in welcome. Skeffington smiled a lot, but she'd never seen him truly amused or smiling like that. The man radiated charisma, but then so did all the other people in the room, a subtle thrum under the calm exterior.

"Welcome, Miss Rafiz." His accent had a touch of Midwest but nothing specific. He sounded cultured and cosmopolitan. Josh's hand touched the middle of her back, and she welcomed his steadying presence. She couldn't remember ever feeling this nervous merely meeting people. Knowing that deep down she belonged here didn't seem to help in any way.

"I'm Cristos, and I run Department 57. Josh says he told you why he came here and what we're trying to do."

Chana forced a smile. "Yes, he has. I'm still having difficulty believing it all."

"That's just as well. We go to great lengths to keep our activities secret." Cristos turned to the others. "Please take a seat, and our colleagues will introduce themselves." Josh pulled back a chair for her and helped her to sit, an old-fashioned gesture no one here seemed to think unusual. He took his seat next to her and reached for the water carafe and a couple of glasses. While he poured them, the three people murmured their names and what they were. A vampire, a Sorcerer, and Anushka, the other shape-shifter. God.

The vampire looked dark and brooding, just as she'd always imagined a vampire, but she hadn't expected to see him in broad daylight. One of the myths, she suspected. The fair-haired Sorcerer wore a good business suit. He was tall, with eyes she didn't like to look into for too long. Anushka was beautiful as always, but at least she wasn't naked this time. They welcomed her with nods and smiles, nothing fulsome, but all the same, Chana had the weird feeling of coming home.

They sat at the table, Josh next to her, sprawling back in his chair. Cristos glanced at him. "Josh?"

"I brought Chana here because I've read enough of her to know she's no threat. Whatever Skeffington is planning concerns her too."

Cristos nodded, then reached for the water carafe and poured himself a glassful, his hands completely steady. He turned his glass, studying the play of light on the clear liquid. Then he looked up. He took a sip of the water, and fascinated, Chana watched his beautifully manicured hands put the glass down and retain it in a loose hold. That hold would prove difficult to break. Much like Skeffington's hold on her, insidious but all encompassing. "We think your stepfather started you on the Cephalox as soon as it became apparent what you were. He's probably locked

away the memory of your first shape-shift, perhaps when he induced the attack that gave you the diagnosis of diabetes.”

“I was in a coma for a day and took some time to recover. I don’t really remember a lot about that time.”

Cristos frowned. “Yes. It would have been then. So we have to conclude that your stepfather knows about your condition. If one of our doctors had come into contact with you, he would have told us about you. Even if you hadn’t wanted to become part of the community, we would have kept an eye on you. Not everybody chooses to live with others of their kind, but our duty is to all of them, not just the ones who want to play nice.” He took another sip of water and watched her, but glanced at Anushka. “Anushka is a shape-shifter. Some mortals know about us and hate us. Or they decide they want what we have and try to get it, one way or another. We think Laurie is being held by one of these organizations.”

After a sympathetic glance at Josh, Cristos turned his attention back to Chana. “So your stepfather knows about you, and he has medical staff who play along with him. The question is, why?”

“I thought it might be to find a cure for Chana’s diabetes, but she doesn’t have diabetes,” Josh put in. His thumb stroked her palm. Distracting but not unwelcome.

“At first I thought you must know, but you allowed Josh to read you. You didn’t know any more than we did. Less in fact. I can’t really understand why your stepfather would hide such knowledge from you.”

“I can.” Anushka took a deep breath and let it out on a sigh. Next to her, Andreas Constant, the vampire, took an appreciative glance at what that did to her breasts, easily discernable under her T-shirt. His lids flicked up, and when he caught Chana watching him, he gave her a devilish smile. She didn’t know if she liked Andreas Constant.

Anushka, seemingly unaware of the exchange, spoke. “I’ve spent a day with him, read what I could of him. In fact, I have to get back soon, so I wish to report my few discoveries before I do. George is showing me his home office. He wants me to meet some of his colleagues. I get the feeling I’m being lined up as a possible candidate for the position of the next Mrs. Skeffington.” She smiled at Chana. “One I’m not tempted to take.” Her gaze went to Andreas, and with that sharp stare, Chana realized Anushka hadn’t missed a thing.

Anushka shrugged. “George Skeffington is one of the most selfish men I’ve ever met. His conversation always returns to him, and he relates everything in his life to himself. His children are completely under his thumb, and he speaks about them as possessions rather than people in their own right. If Chana had tried to escape him, he would have brought her back, not because he loves her or needs her for anything in particular, but because he thinks he owns her.” She gave Chana a grimace of apology. “Sorry.”

"You're right," Chana returned without a qualm. "I went to San Francisco, spent some time on my own, and decided I wanted to join the police force. George let me go through the training before he jerked my chain and pulled me back."

"Why did you go back?" Anushka asked.

Chana gave her a wry smile. "I had no choice. He has a lot of connections. Worldwide. Senators, politicians, business. Whatever I do, he has influence, and he can pull me back. My mother didn't have much to leave me, but George gives me a generous allowance. I hoped to build up some savings and, when George finds another wife or hostess, leave. When Josh arrived I thought he was another of George's ploys, meant to keep me at home." She gave Josh's hand a squeeze. "He wasn't."

"So I'm your way out?"

Under Josh's flippant tone, Chana detected a harder note. "No. I'd planned to get out all on my own." She kept her tone as light as his but wouldn't let go of his hand. She didn't look at him. His concerns would have to wait, but she'd do her best to dispel them later.

"Kanchana, we need to open those blocks in your mind." Something in Cristos's voice made her pause. His words sounded ominous.

"Will it hurt?"

"It might, but not much. What it will do is release a flood of memories you didn't realize you had. I don't know how many memories or what it will do to you. Do you understand?"

"Can Josh do it?" If anyone had to become that intimate with her, she wanted it to be him.

Chana looked at Josh and saw the regret in his bright eyes. "I can't. The power of my mind is mainly in the communication area, in telepathy. You need an expert." He released her hand, and she felt the loss of his touch. He leaned back. If she reached for him now, she'd look needy, and she hated how needy she felt already. She'd never been so confused, so determined to put a brave face on things. Only Josh should see her panic and her fear. To other people that opportunity would give them power over her.

When she looked away, she saw Cristos watching her. His expression seemed impassive, but she sensed an understanding that had nothing to do with telepathy and everything to do with his body language. He wasn't afraid to show his sympathy for her plight. "I think someone's made a mess of it, and it will take an expert to undo the damage. Someone like Fabrice."

With a slight shock, she turned to the blond man, who up till now had said nothing after his initial greeting.

She could easily discern Fabrice's powerful frame under the fine fabric of his business suit, and for all his seeming ease, he sprawled in the chair like an athlete, ready to spring off the blocks and down the track. When he turned his gaze directly

on her, she gasped. Fabrice Germain had laser-beam eyes. He had to wear contacts; eyes just didn't come that blue.

When he spoke, his voice sounded surprisingly gentle. "I've done this before. People mess up their minds or have them messed up for them. I treat everyone with the sanctity of the confessional. If you don't want anyone to find out, they won't. I swear it."

"Even if it affects this case?" He'd just made her a solemn oath, but she didn't know him at all. He kept his mind closed, but not with any heavy barrier. When she'd tried to probe it, it gave, but bounced gently back when she released him, knowing she could find no way through.

"Yes. It's your call, not mine." He flashed a smile, perfect white teeth in a perfect mouth. Too good to be true, she thought. "Tell you what. You show me yours, and I'll show you mine. You'll know as much about me as I know about you."

She had no choice. Josh couldn't do it, and Cristos seemed to know everything about everybody. Chana had a built-in sensor for power, honed by years of Skeffington's training, and Cristos had it in spades. She also had a mistrust of power, also honed by Skeffington, and she didn't want to give him even more control over this situation.

She let out the breath she hadn't been aware of holding. "Okay. Do we do it here?"

"If you don't mind. I can shield us completely. Nobody else will be involved in this." God, that French accent was one hell of a turn-on. Or would be, if she wasn't completely obsessed by Josh.

She felt his presence like a living shield, holding her safe, caring for her. "Yes, we'll stay here."

"Good."

Fabrice leaned forward from his seat on the other side of her to Josh and lifted his long fingers, touching her temples with the very tips. She expected to feel a tingle or something stronger, but she just felt Josh leaving her mind.

She hadn't realized he'd been there. The thought worried her. So did the fact that she felt lonely when he left. Not good, when she wanted independence and a life of her own.

Now she felt a tingle. She stared into those laser eyes, and he stared back, but they appeared empty. Fabrice had gone elsewhere.

He filled her with warmth, reassuring and gentle, so when the sudden pain lanced right through her head, she jerked back, startled into reaction.

"I'm sorry. This is some mess. Brace yourself. I might have to do that a few more times."

Even his telepathic voice had that sexy French accent. Did he have to work at it?

Something inside her lightened, as though he laughed. *"No, I'm part French, and I've been working in the French part of Canada. It's natural."*

Another white-hot pain—sharp, clean, and accurate—but she'd braced herself for it, and she showed no outer reaction. It didn't hurt as much this time.

"Relax, all the doors are open now. Let me look. Look into my mind. Everything is open for you."

She blinked and looked. This was one damaged man. Fabrice was a Sorcerer, forever alone. To keep his formidable powers he couldn't have sex, so he couldn't afford to love. At least he had the standard threescore years and ten. He wouldn't have to put up with this forever. Fabrice was a passionate man who forced himself to walk away from the temptation of women. More than once, he'd tried to hurt himself, so that women wouldn't look at him with desire, but he'd failed. Self-mutilation didn't belong in his makeup, so he'd resorted to putting himself in danger, hoping somehow his beauty would get spoiled. He seemed charmed in that respect. Nothing had worked.

He'd given her one powerful secret, one that could damage him personally, should she choose to reveal it. In return, he would read everything about her. Not even Josh had got that close to her. In opening her mind up, he had to see her greatest fears, her shameful secrets.

Fabrice withdrew and lifted his hands away from her. "Thank you. Now we know the worst about each other."

"Or the best," she said.

"Lean back, close your eyes, and concentrate. Let the memories come back and become a part of you."

She did as he asked her, and the first face she saw when she closed her eyes was her mother's. A precious memory, a beloved face. *"I love you."* The first person to say that to her. Come to think of it, the *only* person to say it to her. Some scattered childhood memories, which might just have given her a clue that she wasn't normal. She scanned through them—she'd explore them properly later.

Then her first, and so far only, shape-shifting.

She lifted her eyelids and reached for Josh. Immediately he was there for her, taking her hand in a gentle clasp. "You'd better all see this. I've reached my first change. Please, you may read me."

How did she know how to say that? How did she learn how to close all but that one memory off?

Her mother. Her mother had taught her.

She felt their presences in her head, and although it should feel strange, it didn't. She'd done this before, felt this before.

Thirteen years old, with her mother and stepfather. George had his arm around her mother, and Chana was dressed only in a loose terry-cloth robe. A full moon rose outside the window, and from the view she knew she sat in Skeffington's office. She felt the change begin, a tingling warmth filling her legs. Drawing the

robe aside, she watched as fur began to sprout. She didn't feel afraid. Her mother had prepared her for this, so she knew what to expect.

When the fur covered her legs and reached up to her waist, she undid the sash of the robe and shrugged it off.

The transformation didn't hurt. It felt strange, but it didn't hurt. When her spine changed, she let herself fall forward and felt her beak form and her skull change shape, pushing her eyes on either side of her head.

The world looked very different from the point of view of this creature.

"She's a griffin," Josh breathed.

Chapter Ten

Chana opened her eyes. She saw Cristos first, gazing at her with compassion filling his silver gaze. "That's the key." Cristos's lips flattened in distaste. "He connected with your mother, Chana. She must have told him what she was and the advantages of her condition. But you saw him, Chana. He was there at your first shape-shift. He started with griffins, and he wanted more for his research."

"That's why he wants the football club. He didn't want the club. He wanted Laurie and me." Because of her, Josh's brother had disappeared, taken by George Skeffington. He needed griffins.

"He wanted to breed her."

The ugly thought, voiced by Cristos, dropped into the sudden silence.

He'd forced them together. Her stepfather knew Josh would fuck her, that she'd want him. He'd managed to turn something she welcomed with joy into something crude and ugly. She went to pull her hand from under Josh's, but he wouldn't let her. He clasped her hand. "*He won't taint this. I won't let him.*"

"You can't go back to that house, Josh. It's too dangerous." That from Anushka.

"If Chana goes back, so do I. And I won't stand back while you find Laurie. I can't stop looking for him, with or without the Department."

"I know that." Cristos leaned back in his chair. "We have an advantage now. George doesn't know we've released the blocks in Kanchana's mind." He smiled. "Thank you, Fabrice."

"Consider it my privilege." Fabrice pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose, as though weary from the effort. "I can confirm Josh's conclusions. Chana is entirely innocent of Skeffington's plotting. And she's a shape-shifter, a griffin."

"I didn't need you to tell me that," Josh growled. Chana detected the jealousy consuming him.

Warmth filled her at the thought. To be wanted. All she'd ever desired, and now somebody did. With her world turning upside down around her, Chana realized she needed time. Time to reassess her new self, time to decide what she wanted and what she could do about her life. She'd delved deep. She knew Josh didn't know about her father's plan until she did, just now.

Josh searched her face anxiously. "You need to rest." He stood up, pulling her to her feet. "She's had enough. You've found what you were looking for, the clue that links the football club to George Skeffington. When you've decided what to do about it, contact us. I've booked us into a hotel for the night."

"It's still the afternoon," she pointed out, smiling.

"You'll sleep," he promised.

* * *

Chana let Josh drive her, smiling when his exclamations reached her ears, even though she knew he was trying to distract her. "Wow, do you know I've never been to San Francisco in the modern era? This is amazing. I thought the streetcars were only there for the tourists, but everyone seems to use them. I love it here."

"If it weren't for the tourists, they might have put something a bit more efficient but less picturesque in their place years ago," she felt obliged to explain.

He greeted each sight with such enthusiasm she'd wished she had time to explore the city anew with him. She felt so familiar with it that she'd almost stopped looking. With most of the other residents, she avoided the heavily touristed spots, but she had to admit that might be a mistake. People wanted to see the Golden Gate Bridge for a reason. It was beautiful, glinting in the early spring light, a testament to the persistence and vision of mankind. "It must be hard to be a vampire and never be able to go out in the sun," she remarked. She'd seen one in the daylight, but maybe he could bear it, if he didn't go out into direct sunlight.

Josh laughed. "No, that's another legend. Vampires love all the stories and spread them around. It helps to distract. It adds to their mystique, and nobody loves mystique more than your average vampire."

"What is true?"

"They are sensitive to the sun, but they can go out in it, if they're careful. They can eat and drink during the daytime, but not at night. They need blood, fresh blood, every day if they can get it, but the older ones can go longer between feeds."

"Do they die if they don't get it?"

"They go into a kind of coma. It takes a lot of effort to get them out again, and some never do come out. The lab, wherever it is, must be experimenting with them too. The Department found some dumped vampire bodies, almost like a challenge. They'd been starved of blood and then experimented on, poor bastards. The vampires' families are after revenge. Vamps are big on revenge. If they find this facility before we do, there won't be much left by the time we get there."

"Will they hurt your brother?"

He consulted the GPS and took a left. "Unlikely."

"So why do you care?"

"Because we want to investigate the place. Discover if there are any more, so we can shut down more than this one. Make sure we get all the perps, so they can't escape and set up again elsewhere. In a killing rage, the vamps will reduce everything to ashes."

"I thought all you cared about was getting Laurie back."

He glanced at her before taking a right. "That's my main concern but not the only one. I want Laurie back, I want to make sure these bastards don't do this to anyone else, and I want to make sure you're safe."

He drew up outside a tall building. The hotel that Josh had found was perfect for their needs. Expensive and discreet, not one of the hotels guests on the A-list would flock to on awards night, but one they might use when they didn't want to advertise their presence. Chana had recognized the name as soon as he'd said it, and approved of the choice.

They left the car to the valet and let the bellboy deal with their luggage, such as it was, following him upstairs to a suite on the first floor.

When the boy had gone, Chana went to the window, only for him to yank her back. She said, "Nobody can see in through the drapes."

"Yes, they can. You're still thinking in mortal terms." When he found the control panel and closed the curtains, she didn't protest. The bed looked very inviting, but although she felt all the aches and pains of a hard day, her mind raced ahead. She couldn't sleep, not yet.

Josh came up behind her and slipped his arms around her waist. "You're a griffin," he murmured, his breath hot in her ear.

"Yes. I seem to be, don't I?"

"You know what that means?"

"That I'm like you?"

"Yes, you are. You know I'm falling in love with you."

Doubt filled her mind. As Skeffington's hostess, she'd done her research. She knew how many women Josh had dated, how fast he tired of them.

He knew. She didn't have to say anything. "Just don't push me away, okay? If you want more time, I'll work hard to give it to you, but I don't want to let you go."

He was trying to lighten the situation for her, make it easier for her to do what she wanted. Her heart burst. Josh's feelings didn't go one way. "No, I won't do that." So much to assimilate. But first things first. "I want more chocolate."

He broke into a laugh, holding her tight. "Chocolate. I'll call room service."

In the shower, she stood under the hot stream of water, just thinking. Having her world turned upside down took some getting used to. She wasn't diabetic. Or human—at least not as she'd always understood it.

How could Skeffington have hidden all that from her? Why did he want to?

She knew; she just knew. The conclusion led to a place she didn't want to go, not yet. She'd always thought Skeffington had put her through school, kept in touch after the divorce out of care for her. Now it seemed he had an ulterior motive.

After her shower, she checked the time, and out of habit, opened her bag and took out the case holding her insulin pen and cartridges. After loading the pen, she held it to her arm. And put it down on the vanity.

What was she doing? This wasn't insulin. She didn't need it. This stuff was stopping her becoming what she should be. She didn't have to take it any longer. A powerful urge to leave her previous life behind gripped her. She wanted a clean sheet, starting now. Starting with this.

Wrapping a terrycloth robe around her, she went back into the other room to the sweet, delicious smell of chocolate.

Josh had taken her at her word. The cart delivered while she was showering held all the chocolate off the menu. Hot chocolate to drink, chocolate tart, Death by Chocolate, sundae dishes holding a mouthwatering concoction of dark, white, and milk chocolate. He watched her take it all in and then murmured, "The ice cream is in the freezer. Tuck in, sweetheart, while I take a shower."

He lingered to watch her take her first mouthful. She started on the bar of Ghirardelli's milk chocolate. "Going for the neat stuff, eh?"

She smiled at him around the gorgeously sweet, rich taste, the chocolate filling her mouth with sensation. She'd had the diabetic equivalent, tasted low calorie chocolate a time or two, but she hadn't had this since childhood. He watched her, frankly enjoying her pleasure before he winked and went into the bathroom.

When he came out again, ten minutes later, she was still eating. She'd had a taste of everything and settled on the dishes she liked best. "Why did you order all these? I can't possibly eat them all. I'll be sick."

"Then be sick." He wore only a towel around his waist, and he looked as delicious as the chocolate. "Make room for more."

"Ugh!" She laughed. "Chocolate isn't the only thing I want." She reached for him across the small table, and without hesitation, he took her hand and laced their fingers together.

"Glad to hear it. I'll be here as long as you want me. Longer."

His gaze left her in no doubt that he meant every word. She tried to lighten the feeling that frightened her, the feeling of linkage, as though they'd never be apart again. "Will you stalk me then?" She gave him a wicked smile, to show she didn't really mean it.

He smiled, an intimate, warm caress. She felt as though he'd touched her. "No, not against your will. But whatever happens, I'll want to know you're well and happy. I want you. I know it, but you have to know it too."

"Yes." How had she gotten so lucky? He loved her enough to let her go, if she needed to. She hoped she wouldn't need him to do it, but she didn't feel sure of anything. Too much shifting sand under her feet. "All my life people have acted in my best interests, tried to do what they thought was best for me. I want to do it for myself."

He released her hand, but she didn't return to eating. Instead, she reached for a bottle of chocolate sauce and got to her feet. "I always wanted to do this as well."

She walked around to his side of the table and got to her knees, reaching for the towel at his waist.

When he realized what she planned, he groaned. "Go ahead. Don't mind me."

She glanced up at him to find his eyes hot with need. When she drew the towel aside, his cock stood already erect, straining toward her, the head richly colored. She lifted the bottle and uncapped it before she turned it upside down and squeezed a thin stream on to his semierect cock.

He gasped. She took her time, trailing streams around the sides, lifting his balls gently so she could decorate them too. She finished with a swirl at the tip, already damp with his own lubrication. He wasn't the only one damp with arousal. She licked her lips slowly and gloried in the soft, low sounds he couldn't prevent escaping. Whimpers of need.

When she bent to him, she took her time and extended her tongue, licking at a trail about halfway down his length.

She started at his balls, taking them into her mouth, swirling her tongue around them and making sure she'd cleaned them perfectly before she moved on. She even sat back on her heels to admire her handiwork, aware of his tension, the way his muscles and tendons stood out tautly. When the belt at her waist loosened, she let it, giving him more of a show but not allowing her robe to completely open.

She bent again and lost herself in the texture of him, the warmth, sweetened by trails of chocolate. He groaned. "Oh fuck, this is something else."

She took care to follow the trails just as she'd traced them, running her tongue over the lines repeatedly until she'd licked up every scrap, before moving on to the next bit. She leaned on his thighs, feeling the powerful muscles tense. Then she opened her mouth, hovering above the tip of his cock.

He lifted to meet her. She'd wanted to see what happened at the height of his arousal; now she did. His cock grew, swelling and lengthening even more until the head entered her mouth. She closed her lips around him and sucked.

Blissful, she lost herself in pure sensation, curling her tongue around him, closing her eyes to concentrate everything in this moment out of time. She'd never really enjoyed giving head before, but this was different. This was Josh.

He tasted wonderful, a tart note through the mouth-filling chocolate, enhanced and essential to her pleasure. She felt him in her mind, caressing her with soft sounds, echoed by the low notes in his throat. He trusted her with his mind, his heart, his masculinity—the vital parts of him—and she took them and stroked them.

With a shout, he gripped her shoulders as though to drag her away, but she refused to leave him, licking and sucking until he couldn't hold back any longer.

Warmth flooded her mouth, and she took it, all of it, and took her time afterwards, cleaning him, kissing, and gently licking his length. Worshipping him.

Leaning back, she looked up.

He opened his eyes, and the blaze in them almost made her start in surprise. She'd seen him filled with desire. She'd seen him in unguarded moments, but never so intense, never so—so filled with passion.

Without speaking, he got to his feet and held out his hand to help her up. Wordlessly, she stood. He led her to the bed as though she were a queen. He drew back the covers for her before walking around to join her and take her into his arms. She went as though she belonged there, curling her leg over his, resting her head on his shoulder.

Only then did he speak. "You don't think I'll let you go without a fight, do you?"

"I won't let you stop me," she warned him, though she hadn't yet made up her mind.

"Then I'll just have to do my best to persuade you, won't I?" He lifted himself up on one elbow, smiling at her. "That was amazing, past anything I've ever felt before."

She lifted her hand and touched his cheek, stroking the light fuzz of a day's beard growth. "In two hundred years?"

"That couldn't be bettered in two thousand." He took the tip of her finger into his mouth, nipping it, then sucking gently. He let her draw it back out. "I can't imagine what it would be like if we joined minds."

She'd unconsciously missed this. She realized almost at the same time he said it. "Why didn't you? I'm open to you."

"Not tonight." He bent and kissed her gently on the mouth. "This is the second night of the full moon, and I'll have to shape-shift form. I don't want you to come into contact with the compulsion to change, not yet. It's too soon."

"Could I change?" What could it feel like? Her early memories, which Fabrice had restored for her, told her it didn't hurt, but she had no sharp memories. All too hazy for her to really identify with.

"Not while you're on the Cephalox. We have to get you off that stuff, darling. In the long run it could damage you."

Now seemed like a good time to ask. She'd wanted to know, but she didn't want to reveal her fears about taking a drug she'd never heard of before, a drug that sounded dangerously experimental. "Has it already damaged me?"

He frowned and avoided her gaze, taking an interest in her collarbone instead.

"Josh, I want to know. I need to know."

He flicked his gaze back up to her, and she saw the trouble clouding them. "To be honest, I don't know. I don't think so. If it hasn't harmed you so far, it's unlikely to have done any long-term damage. I'm praying so, anyway."

So the sooner she came off it, the better. "When should I see a doctor?"

"As soon as possible. There's a special unit for shape-shifters in the general hospital here, and another in a private facility nearby. We can consult one tomorrow, if you like."

He bent and kissed her again, as though he couldn't help it. "I won't linger with my shape-shift. I'll change back. I don't want to be out of your sight any longer than necessary."

"I'm in no danger. My stepfather doesn't know what we've found out. If we don't go back tomorrow, he'll look for us, but for tonight we're okay."

He smiled and heat curled low in her body. "Let's celebrate."

"Celebrate what?"

"Your newfound knowledge, for one thing. You can start to be what you were always meant to be. I can't wait to see you, what you look like. But there's something else."

She quirked a brow.

"My love for you. For tonight, ignore your doubts. Just accept. I won't hold you against your will, but I'll do everything I can to persuade you to stay." He kissed her forehead. "Starting now."

He began by kissing her on the lips, easing her mouth open with the tip of his tongue, then taking possession. Deep, slow, penetrating kisses as though they had all the time in the world and no worries. Almost like a wedding night.

She pushed that thought aside. She didn't even know if shape-shifters went in for lifetime commitments. After all, they lived a very long time.

He punctuated his slow progress down her body with licks and kisses. He lingered a long time at her breasts, kissing around each nipple before teasing them with his tongue tip and taking them into his mouth, sucking deeply until she moaned aloud. His mouth still at her breasts, he reached out his hand to curve between her legs, cupping her before he slicked a finger into her warmth, then two. He teased her, avoiding her clit, circling it, until he kissed down to her navel, and the soft spot just inside her hip, lingering to caress and kiss her. "Please, Josh, please."

He lifted just enough to talk to her. "What? What do you want me to do? Tell me, sweetheart."

He wanted to hear it. She'd never done that before, never asked. She'd do it for him. Hell, she'd beg if he wanted her to. "I want you to eat me, Josh. I want you to suck my clit, lick me until I come, and then ride me hard. Fuck me senseless."

Without warning, he lifted up and covered the last few inches between them without pausing, swooping down on her like some bird of prey. "Oh!"

Within the space of a minute, he had her nearly incoherent. She forced herself to hold still, not to move away from his deep sucks and long licks. He tongued her back to front several times, like she was a Popsicle in his favorite flavor, making appreciative sounds before drawing her clit right in and holding it gently in his mouth with his teeth. He teased and used his tongue to tickle the tip to make her explode in the space of a minute. He wasn't silent either. The slurps sounded wet, possessive, totally addictive.

But he didn't stop. Now, while she was still ultrasensitive from her orgasm, he gave her no quarter. When she tried to writhe away, he pressed his hands to her hips, holding her in place, allowing the torture to turn back into exquisite sensation—heat building and building inside her until she screamed her release again.

Once more, once more, he brought her up until she grew mindless, sensation coursing through her. Then he stopped to taste, to lick up her juices, and make sweet, delicious sounds. He drank her, as he'd promised.

He slipped two fingers inside her pussy while he came back up the bed to share her taste. "You," he murmured, his mouth close to hers, "Are delicious. I can promise I'll never get enough of that. I trust madam is ready to receive me now?"

She gasped, and he kissed her, his tongue penetrating.

Her head went back, but he followed her, pressing a deep kiss to her lips before lifting up to drive hard into her wet, welcoming body. He kept his eyes open, showing her fierce passion, the need to take her.

She felt the same, and like him, she held nothing back, arching her body off the bed in her eagerness to meet him, gasping as her pussy clenched around his cock in spasms of release.

He curved an arm around her waist and lifted her, letting her shift her legs so she could kneel. His body still deep in hers, he thrust harder and supported her when she lost control. She dropped her head to his shoulder, hearing his soft murmur. "Let it go, love. Let it all go. I'll fuck you so much, you'll get addicted to me instead of the Cephalexin."

"I won't." Her breath came back to her, reflected off his muscular shoulder. "Tonight is for always. We'll always have this."

"Pity it's not Paris," he said, drawing out a chuckle from her with the *Casablanca* reference. It should have felt odd, to laugh in the middle of passion, but with Josh, it only enhanced her desire for him.

He'd embedded himself so deep inside her, she felt the throb when he responded to her movements, and he held his breath. She waited, knowing he was holding back his orgasm, wanting this to go on longer.

He opened his eyes. "I'm okay now," he whispered and started to thrust again. His hands on her ass urged her closer, ever closer, and she gripped his back and responded.

Kneeling, their movements became more restricted, but he took the time to watch her, to ensure her satisfaction. Gently now, he moved deeply inside her, driving hard until she sighed in response when he caressed her sweet spot. His eyes lightened with comprehension. "There?" he murmured, moving again. "Oh yeah. There."

Instead of thrusting, he revolved inside her, wreathing her with sensation that became ever more tantalizing, closer and closer until she thought she would never come.

But she did. An exquisite burst, not fireworks but warmth glowing into heat. The unhurried pace meant she could experience it all, the slow burn, the fire she never wanted extinguished.

It left her limp and completely sated, but he remained hard inside her, moving gently in the aftermath. She lifted her head and opened her eyes.

If his passion had been fierce before, it became intense now. Deeper and stronger. He began to withdraw.

"No!" She gripped his waist so he couldn't go.

He lifted one hand to stroke her cheek and give her a soft kiss. "It doesn't matter. I honestly don't care if I come or not. And I might do something stupid if I do. It's best I don't lose complete control, sweetheart."

"Why? What will you do?"

He smiled. "This is the second night of the moon. I'm fertile. We don't need that complication right now."

She sighed. "What?"

"I can only make you pregnant on the three nights of the full moon. If you're a griffin, you're only fertile on those three nights."

He took her hand and moved it down his thigh. She yelped and pulled it back, tilting her head to see.

On his thigh glowed a mark, like a tattoo done in burning fire. A small creature, a—"It's a griffin."

The lines ridged his skin. She didn't remember seeing it before, but then she'd been busy. "Does it hurt?"

"It burns a bit, but not much."

"I like it."

He smiled. "So do I. But it means there are other dangers. The full moon is on us, and that's when I'm nearest to my other form. I'm close to changing. I don't want to scare you, love. You've had enough for one day. I'll leave you for a short time. After I've shape-shifted, I'll come back."

She didn't want that. They'd just made the most perfect love she'd ever known, and she wanted the experience complete. For both of them. "I won't be scared, I promise. Love me, Josh."

He looked at her, and she felt the brief touch of his mind in hers, but he didn't stay. "I needed to be sure," he whispered.

"I want to feel you come inside me."

Nodding, he leaned over and grabbed something from the nightstand, then withdrew from her body. He unwrapped and fitted the condom on himself faster than she'd ever seem someone do that before. Then he lifted his gaze to see her watching him. He kept her gaze as he reached for her. She moved closer, positioned her body over his, and they came together again, as easily as if they belonged. They moved together, a slow dance of love.

She heard a rustle, but she kept her gaze on him, her arms clasping him loosely, so she felt the movement at his back, a gentle accommodation of his muscles. The light in the room changed, but she didn't look away, all her concentration on his loving, gentle movements. She leaned her head on his shoulder, intending to kiss his neck, but halted.

"Your wings. They're your wings."

Glowing deep gold, his wings stretched either side of his body, curving toward her. With a rustle, they settled around her, the feathers touching her gently, stroking her back in whisper soft caresses.

"Yes, my wings. I didn't know what would happen, but it's perfect. I want to fly with you. When you make your first shape-shift, I want to take you up for your first flight."

"It's yours. I promise. I won't go up without you."

Enclosed by soft wings, he thrust hard inside her and came. She felt the heat, the flexing of muscle, and she softened, coming with him, spiraling together into the heavens.

Nothing else existed, she could think of nowhere else she wanted to be. He supported her back down to the bed. The only thing that would disturb her now would be if he left her.

He didn't.

Chapter Eleven

Josh yawned and stretched, watching the woman peacefully slumbering by his side. This felt better than anything he'd dreamed of. Not only the first woman he'd loved with this kind of passion, but another griffin. Almost as if someone had preordained it. He smiled. Her stepfather had deliberately hunted him down, just because he was a shape-shifter, the same as his daughter. In doing so, he'd introduced Josh to the woman he'd fallen irrevocably in love with. The woman he'd die for.

Light filtered through the heavy drapes at the windows, and when he glanced at the clock, the digits told him it was 8:00 a.m. He pressed a kiss to Chana's shoulder, but she hardly moved. He grinned. He'd tired her out last night. The last time had been just before dawn, just after he'd retreated into the bathroom to shape-shift and then change back again, when he'd loved her gently and slowly. With protection. Next time, when the chance of fertility had passed, they'd do it bareback. One day, perhaps they'd deliberately make love without protection in the time of the full moon, make a child together. He couldn't think of anything he wanted more.

He'd have to look after her. Starting with a good breakfast.

Before he picked up the phone, he decided to take a quick shower. She might wake up and decide to join him, and if she did, she couldn't blame him if they ended up making love again, and by that time their food would have grown cold. Breakfast was better hot.

He showered, enjoying the cascade of hot water over his skin, a sense of well-being suffusing his whole body. Everything would turn out right. He loved her—she loved him. They'd take it a day at a time. Once she'd gotten off the Cephalox, he'd take her somewhere hot and quiet where they could spend most of the time naked and he could teach her to fly. In more ways than one.

Wrapping a towel around his body, Josh headed for the vanity, where he shaved very carefully. He didn't want to hurt her skin, and he had every intention of waking Chana with several kisses, not all of them on her mouth.

He noticed an unfamiliar object on the shelf.

An insulin pen, a device for injecting the drug. Except it hadn't been insulin. She'd have to take it for a while longer. They'd consult a doctor today and decide on her treatment. For the cases of Cephalox addiction he'd come across before, gradual

withdrawal seemed the best way. Cold turkey could result in a deep coma, especially after long-term use.

Cephalox had a mild tranquillizing effect, but when a shape-shifter couldn't cope with the transformation and decided to avoid it, he or she sometimes opted to take Cephalox all the time and got addicted. Someone had taken the decision from her. Josh wanted to kill him.

Josh became curious. How did it work? Perhaps he could load it for her, ready for her morning dose. Not a pleasant thought, but they had to do it until the doctors had worked out a program for her. He couldn't hide from it, nor did he want to.

He opened her makeup bag and found her package of cartridges. He picked up the pen, and noticed its unusual weight. He examined it in more detail.

The cartridge inside was still full, the protective sleeve still on the needle.

She hadn't taken it? Bad, very bad. He needed to get her dosed up before she had any adverse reactions. Taking the pen with him, he went back into the bedroom and leaned over to kiss her good morning.

Five minutes later, after shaking her, calling her, and even giving her thigh a small pinch, he knew they'd landed in trouble.

"Cristos, I need you."

Cristos's voice came sleepily. *"I'm here."*

"I can't wake Chana. I think she's missed her Cephalox dose. At least one."

The voice sharpened. Cristos had woken up. *"She's been taking that stuff for years."*

"Since she was thirteen."

"Josh, I don't want to worry you, but she needs to see a doctor. One dose should be fine, but what if she's missed more than one? Two could lead to problems."

Josh heard no worried tones in Cristos's voice, which in itself worried him. He'd taken a moment to control his reaction before communicating with Josh. *"Where?"*

"San Francisco General. Hold on." Josh waited in agony for a few minutes, his hand on her shoulder. He couldn't communicate with her mentally or physically, even at the deepest level. She'd fallen completely unconscious.

Josh received a picture and place he needed to memorize. That was all he needed.

Thank God this was the kind of hotel with opening windows. He tied a sheet securely around Chana, making a kind of sling.

He opened a window, dropped his towel and shape-shifted. He picked up the sling in his claws, making sure to wrap the sheet a couple of times around his front paws.

"I'm on my way."

"I'll meet you there"

The hospital was a short flight, and he found the special wing for Talents with no difficulty, fuzzing his shape to confuse any watchers. Nobody would see a griffin, only a blimp or a helicopter in the sky. A large window lay open for his entrance, so he swept through, glad they'd put the bed in the center of the large room inside.

He hovered over the bed and waited until they'd cut the sheet loose. He'd taken no chances, preferring to lose the sensation in his paws rather than let Chana fall.

He'd never shape-shifted so fast before. Someone handed him a scrubs outfit, and he shrugged into it without taking his attention from Chana, lying white and still on the pristine sheets.

A white-coated doctor already bent over her, and another waited nearby. Cristos stood at the end of the bed, dressed in slacks and a polo shirt. Josh hadn't thought Cristos owned any casual gear. In normal circumstances, his appearance would have surprised him. Today he didn't care.

"I've sent for Fabrice," Cristos said. "He might be able to help."

Swallowing his instinctively jealous reaction, Josh concentrated on Chana.

The doctor stood. He seemed young, or perhaps that was how he preferred to appear. "Dr. Gupta, centaur," he said.

"Josh Friedland, griffin shape-shifter," Josh replied automatically. "Chana's a griffin too."

"How long has she been on the drug?"

"Since she was thirteen. She's thirty now. Until yesterday, she thought she was diabetic, but then she learned her insulin was Cephalox. I didn't know she hadn't taken her dose."

If he had, he would have held her down and made her take it.

"She's only just learned she's a shape-shifter," Cristos murmured. "She seemed to cope well."

"Yesterday was the third day of the full moon," the doctor said. "That would not have helped. She would have felt restless." He looked up, snagging Josh in his dark gaze. "Did you shape-shift in front of her?"

Josh shook his head. "Not last night. I did it in the bathroom, very briefly, when I went for a slash." The doctor stared at him, not understanding the British slang. "I had to urinate, and afterward I shape-shifted. It was enough to settle me down." He cleared his throat. "But I did partially shape-shift earlier. I stopped the complete transformation." He felt slight irritation. At least he'd taken care of his needs, more than she had. "What can you do?" he asked the doctor.

"Did anyone tell her the drug is addictive?" Dr. Gupta demanded.

Josh thought and shook his head. "She knows it's dangerous if taken long-term. But I don't think anyone told her it was addictive, that coming off it cold turkey could lead to problems."

Cristos groaned. "And insulin isn't addictive, per se. It's just necessary for diabetics. Once she realized she wasn't diabetic, it might have seemed unnecessary to her."

"Another dose might or might not bring her out of it. I'm afraid the chances are that it would not. I have never come across someone taking Cephalox for this long. As you know, the drug is dangerous, and most addicts don't last long. Twenty years at the most." He looked up. "She is close to that. I would rather try to take her off completely. She has begun the process. If we give her another dose, it could kill her."

Dully, Josh took it in, and a part of his mind, the detached part, accepted it. For now. The reasoning part knew that if Laurie had died, and Chana followed him, so would he. He couldn't see any point going on without them.

Making the decision left him a little lighter, more able to think clearly. "So what do we do?"

"Our best chance lies with the Sorcerer. He may be able to connect with her, and if he can, he needs to hold that part, keep it safe, and try to open the other paths in her mind."

"When will we know?" How long did he have to wait before he knew if she would live or die?

"Pretty soon. If the Sorcerer can't make contact, we'll have to give her a dose of the drug. It's the only other way. This dose could make things worse, but it's our only chance."

Josh glanced around the room, forcing the tears back. No time for that now. "It's the full moon. Won't she shape-shift tonight? Isn't that a good thing?"

Dr. Gupta shook his head, and his frown deepened. "She'll shape-shift. But if she does it before we've contacted her, she could stay that way. She hasn't shape-shifted for nearly twenty years, and without conscious willpower, her body will want to keep her in the other form. Maybe for another twenty years, to make up the deficit."

Josh's heart lightened, just a little. "I'll wait for her. Twenty years is doable."

"No, my friend. When she comes back, her memory will be gone, wiped. You know a long time in your other form will do that sometimes."

Yes, he knew. Faced with heartbreak, shape-shifters often opted to stay in their other form for just that reason. To forget. If he joined her, they would both forget. He'd do it, to be with her, but neither of them would remember the other. His soul needed her, cleaved to her. He'd have to put his trust in that. But he'd seen shape-shifters just out of many years in their other form. They behaved like children, had to relearn how to speak, remembered nothing of their previous lives as humans. For some that had proved a blessing. It wouldn't for him.

So it came down to that. If he couldn't reach her by moonbreak, she would be lost to him forever. Just when he'd found her, when he'd reached the woman he wanted to keep, she would leave him.

He bit his lip and concentrated, trying to enter her mind. Nothing but barriers, blank walls, no way in. He could go mad trying, but anything was better than just waiting.

He was still trying to find a way in when he felt a hand on his shoulder and received a message. *"It's Fabrice. Let me try."*

Startled, Josh looked up and received a sympathetic smile from Fabrice. He wore his T-shirt inside out, showing evidence of hasty dressing, which pleased Josh. Fabrice cared. He'd showed some urgency.

Fabrice spoke aloud, breaking the churchlike silence. "I'd like you to come in with me, if I can find a way. I only met Chana yesterday, and you are more involved with her. If she's going to come back, she'll do it for you."

"Anything you say." He meant it. If Fabrice was the only chance they had, he wanted the man to have a free hand. Hell, he'd pay anything, do anything, to get this to work.

Fabrice must have seen the desperation in Josh's eyes, for he squeezed his shoulder before releasing it.

Chana lay on a narrow hospital bed, but they hadn't hooked her up to anything except a drip of clear liquid. They must have done that while he was trying to contact her.

The doctor spoke. "It's saline, to keep her hydrated. That's all. Time to do something more elaborate later and only if we need it."

Christ, that meant catheterization, feeding tubes, all the paraphernalia he'd only ever seen before in comatose people.

He stood up, to let Fabrice take his place by the bedside. Someone provided an extra chair so he could sit next to Fabrice and take Chana's hand in his left and Fabrice's in his right. He felt Fabrice's strong, warm grip and Chana's cool, loose one. His heart ached.

"I suggest we leave them alone, gentlemen." The doctor's voice came almost as a shock, it sounded so mundane.

"I'll stay." Cristos spoke quietly but firmly.

Just in case. In case they couldn't get out, in case something went wrong. "Can you help?" Josh had to ask.

Cristos sighed. "Maybe. If something happens, I'm probably the best hope you've got. I can't do what Fabrice is about to do because I didn't enter her mind when it was relatively healthy. I didn't go deep. I don't know where to go. But I know Fabrice. I've linked with him so I might be able to help."

"Backup," Josh said.

Fabrice flashed him a sharp look. "Watching my six."

Josh got the feeling this wasn't the first time Cristos had watched Fabrice's six, and vice versa.

No time for anything except Chana now. He sat as still as he could, watching Fabrice draw his considerable internal energy into himself. Josh felt like he was watching a vacuum. Fabrice had considerable presence normally. Josh knew he worked in advertising in some capacity, and that didn't surprise him. Fabrice could probably sell sand to the Arabs if he wanted to. Without using any kind of mind persuasion.

Now Fabrice drew every part of his considerable personality into himself. If he'd been sitting in a small room with five other people, the others would swear they felt only five people present. Fabrice took several deep breaths, then gripped Josh's hand tighter. "Here we go."

Josh closed his eyes and concentrated.

Time disappeared, melted away as he sent all his support, everything he had to Fabrice.

He waited outside Chana's mind, unable to enter, as Fabrice looked for an opening. Anything would do. If he could insert a mental needle, he could find a way in. His mental powers pulsed, stronger than anything Josh had ever come across before, and he felt so glad of it. If he could do anything for Fabrice, whether Fabrice won or lost, he would do it. He knew what it would cost the Sorcerer to fight a battle like this. Add to that Fabrice was facing his own worst nightmare head-on. He was entering a woman in the only way possible for him.

Josh couldn't imagine what Fabrice went through. The joys of sharing a bed with a woman, or a man, denied him, forever forced to make the choice—the gift that made him special or ordinary. Human love, something so sublime people took it for granted. He would rather face a lifetime mourning Chana than miss the chance of loving her.

No. Negativity formed their worst enemy. Determinedly, Josh shut that possibility out of his thoughts, blocked it from his mind.

He tried to become a source of strength for Fabrice, but he found it hard to sit by and let someone else give the woman he loved what she needed. Every cell in his body protested, wanted to charge in and take control, but that way disaster lay. He'd tried and tried to find a way, and he had to stand back and let someone more skilled help, when he knew he could do no more. His mind and body raged against it, wanted to be the one to help her, but this was the best he could do.

Josh had no idea how long they waited, while Fabrice did everything he could to probe Chana's mind. He opened his mind fully, made it available to Fabrice, and then he felt another. Cristos. The rapier-sharp intelligence, the keen observation of detail, all spoke of the head of Department 57. Cristos opened too but kept a part of himself away, the part he would have to use if he had to rescue them.

If that happened, Josh didn't want to be rescued.

Chapter Twelve

When Chana opened her eyes, she saw another pair of eyes. Golden, worried eyes. Josh.

She tried to smile, but the effort proved too much. "Hello," she managed instead, though she found even that hard to do.

"Hi," he replied. "You nearly gave me a heart attack."

She blinked. She wasn't in the hotel room any more. "Where am I?"

"San Francisco General Hospital. I brought you here when I couldn't wake you up. You took yourself off the Cephalox, sweetheart. Not a good idea."

Hospital? Muzzily she went over a confusing haze of recollections. Not taking the Cephalox. Making transcendent love with Josh. Then a mess, nothing real, like dreams. People talking about her, and she unable to respond. Someone in her mind, feeling her, touching her with disturbing intimacy.

Fabrice.

Her eyes widened. Behind where Josh sat, staring down gravely at her, stood Fabrice Germain, the French Canadian man, the man with the amazing eyes. "*Bonjour*. How do you feel now?"

"Wiped," she answered and heard a sound. Turning her head, she saw Cristos.

"Why did you stop taking the Cephalox?"

"There didn't seem much point. I'm not diabetic, and it was stopping me being the person you said I should be. I wanted to see what it was like."

"You will change form tonight," he said. "This is the last night of the full moon. You won't be able to help yourself."

She caught her breath in wonder. "Truly?"

"Truly. If you think you're wiped now, wait until tonight."

"I'll be with her." Josh sounded as exhausted as she felt. Without bothering to wonder what it would look like, she stretched out her hand to him and felt it wrapped in warmth. She hadn't realized how chilled she felt until then. "Jesus, you're cold," she heard before he stood up and took something Cristos handed to him. A blanket. Warmth settled over her body, and she sighed in contentment.

"Didn't you know that Cephalox is addictive?"

"No, I didn't. I was just glad not to have to take it anymore. Oh how could I have been so stupid?" Now she felt like crying. Well, fuck that, in front of three grown men, she didn't intend to dissolve into feeble tears.

Josh took her hand again and squeezed it. "It's as much my fault as yours. I had other things on my mind, but I should have made sure that you took the stuff." Fabrice surprised her when he flushed, hot pink under his lightly bronzed skin. "I'm still in your mind, Chana. I need to stay there until we're sure you're okay."

Oh God, she'd just thought of sex with Josh with someone else there to see it. "What happened? Why are you there?"

"The Cephalox made you close down. All your shutters came down, and I couldn't reach you. You were in a coma."

She swallowed when she heard the desperation in Josh's voice. He must have had a bad time when he discovered that.

Cristos's voice came cool and clear, like a draught of clear water. "Fabrice was the only person who had the strength to reach you. The nearer Sorcerers are to their Hungarian origins, the more powerful they seem to be. Fabrice's Hungarian ancestry makes him very powerful."

She looked up at Fabrice in surprise. "You don't look Hungarian."

He laughed. "It comes from my mother's side. Besides, we're not all dark-haired Magyars, you know. We didn't live separate from society. The genes tend to descend in the female line, but males can be the recipients. Some of us are stronger than others, and we have to take certain precautions to remain strong."

"Is that why you're...?" She snapped her mouth closed, appalled she could even begin to blurt such a thing out that he'd vouchsafed to her in private. What had passed between them that time was intensely private.

He laughed, but it sounded strained to her. "A virgin? It's self-evident, *ma chérie*. Everyone in this room knows it. I have to stay that way if I want to retain my powers."

Chana wondered how long she could hold on to such powers. Would she even want to?

Without warning, his voice sounded strong in her mind. "*You think I never wanted to? I have responsibilities. I can't let go just like that. And it would be with someone like you.*" He sounded bitter, but the last sentiment surprised her. He'd never shown a sign of thinking about her like that. A smile flickered across his lips, gone almost as soon as it had arrived. "*You are not mine. I couldn't break the oaths I took and then betray someone like Josh.*"

"Can he hear us?"

"No."

"Does he know how I feel about him?"

"He'd be blind not to at least hope for it. Tell him, Chana."

She didn't allow herself to think. It might have been too late for them, had Fabrice not found a way into her mind. She turned her head and met Josh's gaze, staring right into the fierce, predator's eyes. "I love you."

His grip on her hand increased, making her gasp, and his eyes softened with unshed tears. "I'm glad. I love you too."

He let her read his fear, that her contact with Fabrice might have led to more. But she knew it without mind contact, without doubt. Fabrice might have broken his oaths for her. She hoped that one day he would find someone he could love enough to do that with. But it wouldn't be her.

Fabrice spoke gently. "I'll leave you now, Chana. Josh can enter your mind and keep you safe for the next few hours until moonrise. Close your eyes and relax."

She felt another presence enter, caring and fierce, and something else withdraw. She hadn't realized it was there until he left, a soft, protective blanket she knew as Fabrice.

Josh remained with her. Fabrice had gone from her mind. "I'll always be here if you need me," he said. "You need to keep Josh with you until your first change. Then you should be all right. Eat, drink, rest. But don't sleep until after you've shape-shifted."

She smiled at the tall Canadian, and he smiled back. Friends.

He glanced at Cristos, who walked him to the door and exchanged a few murmured words with him. Cristos looked back at them. "I'll rustle up some food for you both. Do you need any clothes?"

What an odd question. Only then did she notice that Josh was wearing what looked like green hospital scrubs and she wore a white paper gown, the kind hospitals issued patients for operations. She licked her lips, suddenly gone dry. "How did we get here?"

"I flew you here," Josh said without inflection, but he watched her closely.

She smiled. "I wish I could have been awake."

"Believe me, sweetheart, so do I."

His tones held all the worry he'd felt. Chana liked it that he didn't attempt to hide it from her. "Am I okay now?"

"A bit fragile. Like Fabrice said, someone has to stay with you, in your mind, until after your first shape-shift."

She swallowed, nervousness hitting her midriff. "Will you help me do that?"

"You'll do it on your own. Now you're off the drug, your body won't be able to resist. Then you just reverse the process to get back to your human form." A slow smile spread across his lips. "You're a griffin, love. Just like me. Irresistible."

"Just like you."

* * *

Moonbreak came all too soon—and not soon enough. The others had left them alone, but they remained in the hospital, in case they needed medical help. A precaution, Cristos had said.

Josh saw Chana's apprehension, felt it as if his own, when finally, she felt a stirring, a bit like the beginning of indigestion. Seated inside her like this, he felt her fear and set to soothing her. "I'm here. Come on, feel my urge too. That's the feeling you get when it starts. It's your warning."

She forced a tentative smile. He folded back the covers on the bed and helped her out. "We need to undress. Otherwise we'll split these things."

After a moment, she found she could stand on her own. She didn't feel nearly as weak as she had earlier in the day. She stripped off the hospital gown and stood in the center of the small room, just at the bottom of the bed. Josh suppressed the urge to forget it all, to take her back to bed, and love her until it ended.

"I'll keep our sizes small," he told her. "There's not enough space to reach our full size. But don't worry. I can control that for both of us. Let it happen, Chana. Go with it. When you see the trick of it, you'll know how to change back. And if you don't get it right away, I can help you with that too."

He held her hand until he saw the fur sprout on their arms. Then his changed form forced him forward on to all fours. Beside him, she did the same thing.

Just as well he'd had the experience of 250 years of monthly shape-shifting. He needed every minute of it now.

He felt her terror. He didn't remember what the first transformation felt like, and this belonged as much to his life as driving his Porsche. But now he remembered. Nameless fears and terrors, wondering if he would change back, if he would feel different in himself. Without words, he soothed her, stroking her mind, feeling her give herself up to him. She would never regret it, he vowed.

He clasped her tightly in his mind, as though he held her lovely body in his arms. He let her see them, naked and locked tightly together in their human form, let her concentrate on that image while she changed.

"You feel it. That is enough. You'll be able to duplicate it whenever you wish now."

"What about changing back?"

"You can do it."

He could do it for her, but he wanted her to do it on her own. Some shape-shifters never got the knack and remained dependent on parents, siblings, or their partners all their lives. He didn't want that for her. He'd take on the burden gladly, but she would hate the dependency. A little late for her to learn, but like someone coming late to driving, she could learn and become stronger for doing so.

Chana made a very beautiful griffin. The feathers on her wings and head gleamed fierily in the cold moonlight. Her eyes glinted a wicked amber when she turned her head to look at him, her cruel beak strong enough to rip a man apart, even in this small version of herself. Josh had taken care of the size but hadn't intruded on her to do so. It came naturally to him to adjust his form to take account of his surroundings, and he easily took her with him.

"You are lovely."

"Like this?" Tentatively, she shook a wing, the new feathers rustling in the slight breeze from the open window.

"Indeed. Very beautiful. Are you ready?"

"To change back?"

"No. To fly." He chuckled at her shock. *"We don't have to, but it's a short flight to the hotel. We could go straight back there, if you wanted to. Be on our own instead of facing the questions and plans."*

"I-I'm not sure. How could we pass unnoticed?"

She remained Chana, whatever form she took. He felt her confidence grow, knowing her essential character remained the same.

"We can become the size of small birds, or we can fuzz. Then people who spot us will dismiss us as an illusion or won't remember us at all."

"Another skill?" Her doubt came through clearly.

"Another day." Surely enough. He would rather slip back to the hotel than have to find two sets of clothes and drive themselves there, then gain access to their rooms. *"Your decision. We can borrow some clothes and get a cab, or we can fly there. I can fuzz for both of us."*

After a long silence, which he didn't try to interrupt, she said, *"I want to fly."*

"You're sure?"

"Fuck no, but I'm sure I want to try. I dreamed of it for years."

He didn't feel surprised. If she hadn't flown, the urge had to appear somewhere. He loved flying. Better than football, better than driving, better than anything else he could think of. No, he corrected himself. Making love to Chana was better.

He looked up suddenly and smiled, not easy to do with a beak instead of a mouth, but he did his best to show her how pleased he felt by her decision. Not just because of the convenience, but because she was taking the new decisions on her own, entering her new life willingly. *"I am so proud of you."*

Watching her reaction, he reduced his size. She studied him from one bright eye, her head cocked in his direction. Then he did the same for her and showed her how he'd done it. Her laugh lingered only in their minds, but it rang through him joyfully. A few hours ago, he'd feared for her life, and now she had returned to him, bright and full of hope for the future.

"You'll have to stay in this form all night and perhaps part of tomorrow in order to kick the addiction. Then you should be fine."

He could have sworn she blushed, but in this form that was impossible. *"How do I... That is—"*

His chuckle echoed richly in their minds. *"You'll see. It's all manageable. Come."*

He led the way to the window, where he hopped up on the sill and helped her to do the same, showing her the way to spread her wings and use the impetus to

impel her forward. They looked down. They perched only three stories up, but it looked like much more to a small bird. Miles.

She didn't flinch, either physically or mentally.

He dropped off the sill.

Her scream echoed in his mind, but he allowed the air to take him and came back up to face her.

"See? If you fall, I'll increase in size, fuzz, and carry you. Try it."

She lifted one paw and held it in the air. Then she jumped.

At once, she spread her wings as though she'd always done it. When she found the current took her, she laughed and made a strange sound, halfway between a caw and a roar.

She soared. He watched for a moment before he followed, his heart bursting with pride and love. She'd done it.

* * *

"I'm hungry."

Josh shape-shifted back into human form. "I think you could change now. We'll call room service."

He watched her return to Chana the human. She'd found the last twenty-four hours a strain but had coped better than he'd hoped. He'd kept in griffin form too, feeling he would be cheating to do it any other way. He'd shown her what she needed to know, but since griffins feasted on raw meat, he thought it better for them to go hungry. Time enough to introduce her to that later, if they needed to.

She blinked. He knew the feeling well. As a griffin, their eyes appeared birdlike, on either side of their head, so the return to stereoscopic vision could become disorienting. It would take her a few minutes to regain her vision. Josh stepped closer and took her into his arms. "Let me take care of you, sweetheart. You'll be fine in half an hour or so. Very few shape-shifters go for a day their first time. You did really well. I'm so proud of you."

He guided her to the bathroom and switched on the shower. "Let's get clean first, okay?"

She looked up at him, one eye closed. It looked like a saucy wink. "That would be great."

He got in the shower with her, and she laughed shakily. "I can manage. You don't have to do this."

He bent and growled in her ear. "Oh yes I do."

In their griffin form, she'd asked, and he'd answered all her queries. They'd had little else to do. The TV had killed an hour or two, with Josh making a quick shape-shift to use the remote, but the mindless daytime programs had palled very quickly, and they'd talked, mind to mind.

It only confirmed the way he felt about her, and now she lay open, her mind free of restraints, he'd waited for any signs of rejection but had found none. She might decide to live on her own for a few years. He hadn't forgotten her concerns. He didn't want her to see him like this, needing her so badly but with worry circling his mind. If she wanted to go, he had to have the strength to let her, so she could come back to him whole. If she came back.

He found the shampoo before he scooped her hair into his hands, then set to massaging her head, working his fingers against her scalp in a soothing rhythm.

Chana shuddered. "Where did you learn to do that?"

He chuckled. "I'm a sportsman, sweetheart. I have physios working on me all the time. Do you really think I didn't get them to teach me a trick or two?"

She leaned against him. "Just don't stop."

"Not yet. I won't stop yet."

He used the shampoo as body wash and lubricant, moving to her shoulders and her sides, curving his hands around her waist to wash her stomach and stretching his hands lower.

He rubbed her all over, her low moans feeding his soul. He drank in her sounds, the feel of her, tried to commit it to memory. Under his hands, her skin felt silky smooth, even when he'd rinsed off the soap. He could have stayed there a lot longer, but she turned to face him again. "My turn," she whispered.

He watched her pour a puddle of shampoo into her hand, and swallowed. For the life of him, he couldn't think of a word. Smiling, she reached up to his hair.

Her massage might not have been as professional as his, but it was thorough, and the best he had ever received in his life. She took her time, soaping his chest, lingering at his nipples before she rinsed them off and tasted them with the very tip of her tongue. His groans only encouraged her to do more.

"I love your body," she murmured, running the shampoo down his back, so it insinuated itself into the cleft of his ass, stirring feelings he couldn't help and didn't want to. He was too far gone for that.

"I love it too, when you treat it like this."

His cock hardened even more, something he hadn't thought possible. It had begun the minute she had shape-shifted back into human form and had gone way beyond his control now. Wickedly, she worked around it, shampooing his pubic hair and pulling the blond curls into little peaks before rinsing it all away. "I could get quite creative here," she mused. She would have sounded pensive, except for the little tremble in her voice that revealed how turned on she felt. As if he couldn't smell her arousal, the musky scent rising above the gentle vanilla perfume of the shampoo.

"Please, oh please," he moaned.

"Begging now?"

"Anything you want, but just touch me, Chana, please."

She did better than that. Pulling him forward, she took his cock into her mouth.

He nearly came on the spot. Crying out, he reached for her to pull her away but ended up holding her head steady and pushing forward, careful not to choke her but desperate to feel her on him. She licked. She sucked gently, took his balls in her hand, and continued her massage, rolling them in her palms. He felt, he actually felt, the warm rush. "Chana!"

He lost it completely, no longer capable of even giving a warning, only one word possible. He came, crying her name over and over, then slumped back against the toughened glass of the shower. He distantly felt the coolness on his back. Reaching up desperately, he found the edge of the screen and held on for dear life, his body jerking uncontrollably.

Chana didn't lift her head until she'd taken it all. He could only gaze into her eyes, all the adoration he'd wanted to conceal there for her to see. "Oh God, Chana, I love you."

She smiled and lifted up on tiptoe to kiss him, a gentle brushing of lips. "I know. I love you too."

It was her turn to take control, switching off the stream of water and reaching for towels for their bodies and hair. She watched him, not herself, drying her body without looking, then dropping the towel and reaching for his. Her gentle rubbing over his chest made him feel pampered and cared for. He would love to get further acquainted with this.

When he lifted his arms to hold her she stepped back. "Keep your arms there. Just for a moment. You're beautiful, you know that? All that sleek muscle and yummy skin, just oozing sex."

He smiled. "It's all yours. You can do whatever you want with me."

"Hmm, I'll have to think about that." She dried his arms and gave him the towel so he could scrub his hair dry. "Let's go to bed."

She turned as if to leave the room, but before she got across it, he stepped ahead of her, leaning his hand against the door. "Oh no, not yet. I think I have a favor to return."

He set about her, pinning her arms under his hands, then sliding down them to hold her hips steady. He looked her over, lingering on the contours of her body, letting her know just how much she turned him on. All the anxieties of the last day turned into a frantic need to show her, to love her, and love her again.

He kissed her, pushing his tongue into her mouth, his hands busy, lifting to her breasts to take their weight in his hands, and curl his thumbs over her chocolaty nipples. He could still taste himself, very faintly, an elusive flavor he didn't stop to analyze, except for the need to show her how she tasted in return.

Her breasts looked lovely, the nipples tightly puckered for him, ready for him to take each in turn into his mouth, caressing and sucking until she cried out in

desire. "Oh Josh, oh, that feels so good." The last word had so many o's he didn't think she would finish it, and he smiled against her skin.

He let his fingers play, massaging the tender spot just inside her hips, stroking gently to heighten her nerve endings, sensitize them as much as he could. He wanted to drive her as wild as she'd just driven him. Lifting his head and going to one knee, he licked around her navel, tracing the little creases with his tongue before plunging deeply inside for a brief moment. He continued down, paying homage to the most succulent body he'd ever tasted, until he reached the shower-damp dark curls, now dampening with something other than shampoo. He licked where his fingers had played, sucking the skin slightly, and glided his hands up the insides of her legs, taking his time.

He groaned aloud when he discovered how wet she felt, how hot. Still he teased with deliberate purpose, touching her, heightening her sensitivity with every glide, every gentle skim of his fingers. Between her thighs, repeating the featherlike touches, then inside the crease, grazing her erect clit as though by accident. He murmured words against her body, knowing his breath would heat her even more. "I love muff diving."

Chana moaned his name just before he caught her clit in his mouth.

He licked it, traced all around it with his tongue before sucking it in, hearing her moans, exploring her soaking pussy, and then sliding one finger inside her. While he worked her clit, bringing her up and further up, he slid two more fingers up and pushed them inside. Gently at first, then harder. He slid his free hand around the soft curves of her bottom and between, barely touching her sweet ass, and then slipping the very tip of one finger inside the tiny opening before holding it steady. Her first exclamation was replaced by an increase in volume when she called his name, startled, then accepting.

Josh slipped into her mind, knowing she would recognize his presence instantly. She welcomed him, and her warmth and heat nearly made him come again. Whispering her name in her mind, he told her how sweet she tasted, how beautiful she appeared to him.

"Come for me, my beautiful woman. Come for me now."

Long waves of tremors shuddered against his fingers, her clit reached a peak of hardness in his mouth, and he sucked, feeling her wetness gush over his hands. Her cries reached a crescendo, and she locked her leg muscles. He would have smiled. He knew how she felt. She'd made him feel that way a bare fifteen minutes before.

Only when she softened against him, when the muscle spasms had ceased, did he get to his feet and share her essence with her, kissing her long and deep. She welcomed him into her mouth as she had into her mind, reaching out to hold him close.

He found the door handle and drew his mouth away a fraction. "Let's go to bed."

"I am tired."

"Can you hold on for another twenty minutes or so?"

She pushed her belly against his growing cock. "Oh yeah."

* * *

His cell phone woke him up, startling him out of a sound slumber. Not wanting Chana to wake up, Josh reached across her and picked it up, checking the bedside clock for the time. Seven forty-five. It didn't say what day.

"Yeah?"

"Josh, is that you?"

George Skeffington. Damn. He nearly hung up on the man there and then. Or told him to go fuck himself. "Yes, it's me. Anything wrong?"

"You bet your life there is. Where's Kanchana? Have you seen her? She went out with you two days ago, and when I went to check her room before dinner, she still wasn't back."

It took him a day to realize she'd gone? How did that score for fatherly concern? Josh rolled on his back but kept Chana tucked to his side. Some primitive need to protect her kicked in, and he wanted to hold her. "She's with me, George."

"Well, hell! You could have contacted me."

"We were a little tied up." He grinned when he remembered what that meant. "Did you try her cell?"

"It's on voice mail. I'm very displeased with you both. You could have called and told us you were okay."

"Yeah, sorry about that." He didn't feel sorry, however hard he tried.

He didn't sound mollified. "I could have you fired."

His grin broadened. "Sir, there are a dozen top football teams that want me. I stay with the Dons because of my loyalty to Ted and the team, not because I can't get a job anywhere else. In any case, you can't get rid of me until the next transfer window. You can only pay me to do nothing."

"I'm sure something could be arranged," George said silkily.

"You wouldn't want your future son-in-law without a job, would you?"

A significant pause ensued. "You haven't known Kanchana long enough to even consider that. Get back here. Now." No silkiness in the tone now, only cold, hard efficiency.

Josh wanted to growl back at him but kept his voice cordial. "We had a hard night. Chana wasn't feeling well and went to the hospital. She's fine now, but she needs her rest."

Anxiety sharpened his tone. "What's wrong with her? Why didn't you contact me?"

Was it his imagination or did he really feel another mind reaching for him down the line? A weak, unpracticed one, but Josh sensed it. He cut off its feeble efforts to locate him. "There was no time. She's fine now. The doctor said it was just a touch of food poisoning."

"Has she taken her insulin?"

This time Josh clamped a hand over the phone while he controlled his breathing. Did George want to provoke him so badly he'd lose control? Did George know she had Cephalox, not insulin in those vials? He'd bet the farm on it.

His breath hitched in his throat. He had to know if George was controlling this or if it went further. He had to know for sure. Finding Laurie might depend on it. "Insulin?" He kept his voice low, unthreatening.

"You must know she's diabetic."

Josh worked hard but could read nothing but sincerity in George's voice. "Yes," he said, more to buy time than anything else. "She's fine. Her problem had nothing to do with her diabetes. We just had to make sure her blood was balanced, so the hospital kept her in for a while."

George's sigh of relief came back at him. "Bring her home, Josh."

"Okay, when she wakes up." He still didn't know if he would take her home or not. "You wanted this, didn't you?"

"What?"

"Chana and me."

A slight pause before he heard George's voice again. "Not necessarily. My stepdaughter is my hostess, nothing more. What she chooses to do in her spare time is up to her."

"You should be paying her overtime."

With satisfaction, Josh heard George's breathing quicken slightly. He'd got to him. Perhaps George did care about Chana after all, or perhaps he took the insult personally. "I told you. That's her decision. Before I invited you into my home, I had security and personality checks run on you. You're a playboy, but that's to be expected. Many sportsmen are. But you don't treat your women badly. I had no reason to be afraid for my stepdaughter."

"Did you *want* us to get together? Did you work for it?"

George cleared his throat. "Well, she has been a bit unhappy lately. I had to pull her off the active police force. She was a liability there, but she never saw it like that. I did it for her own good. She would have been fired otherwise."

Josh didn't believe that for a moment. More than competent, Chana would have made a good cop. George had her pulled for his own ends. But he might love his stepdaughter, for all that. "Whatever you say, George."

"That's better."

Although anger rose in him, Josh quelled it. Not now. They had to go stealthily, carefully, discover everything they could. Because of Laurie. But having

heard George, Josh didn't feel so sure any more. What if George was a pawn of someone else? Fronting for the real danger? "Is Anushka okay?"

"Oh yes." From the purr, Josh knew Anushka had been doing her job. He fervently hoped she hadn't slept with George, but Anushka was a firebird and perfectly capable of enchanting a man without commitment. "She's a delightful woman. Wouldn't it be something if she became the sixth Mrs. Skeffington?"

"*No chance.*" Anushka had better taste than that. "Sure."

"Oh yes, I almost forgot. I took a phone call for you yesterday. From your brother."

"What?"

He gripped the receiver tightly and felt Chana stir next to him. His response had been involuntary, but now he put every sense on alert, reaching out as though he could clutch his brother from the very air. "Laurie?"

"Yeah, Laurie. He said he'd call here soon. I said he was welcome, and he's arriving later today. I'm looking forward to meeting him."

Dear God. Had it all been a false alarm then? Had Laurie disappeared from the face of the earth on a whim? Or had George done it, as a way of getting all his griffins where he wanted them?

No. It couldn't be possible. Although Laurie could behave with fecklessness and almost always acted impulsively, this was no false alarm. "Did he say where he'd been for the past month or so?"

George chuckled, and Josh wanted to hit him for making light of the desperate worry he'd felt for the last few weeks. "He said he'd been kidnapped, but I think that was more voluntary than he admitted. Otherwise, it would have been all over the media, wouldn't it? I got the feeling he might not be arriving alone. See you later."

He hung up. Josh stared at the phone as though he could conjure Laurie up through it.

He turned to find Chana staring up at him, alarm replacing sleepiness in her eyes. "Josh? What is it?"

"Laurie. He's coming back."

Chapter Thirteen

Chana blinked, unable to take in the news. Josh didn't seem very pleased, considering Laurie had become the center of his thoughts recently. "Why aren't you smiling?"

"Because your stepfather told me. And because I can't feel him or contact him."

She sat up, clutching the sheet around her. "George has Laurie?"

"He says he called and said he was coming home. I have to go, Chana, though I think it's a trap."

She reached out to him, and immediately he folded her in his arms. "Don't go."

"I have to. But I won't go until I've contacted Cristos."

"I don't want you to go." She didn't give a fuck about Laurie at that point, only Josh.

"Sweetheart, I'll be fine. I promise."

She thumped his chest. "How can you promise?"

He kissed her forehead. "I can get away. I want to go in, see what's going on, and bring Anushka out. I think she could be in trouble."

Cristos informed, there seemed little else to say, but until Josh got in his car ready to drive back, Chana didn't let go of his hand. He lifted it to his lips and kissed each knuckle in an old-fashioned but highly erotic gesture. "I have more reasons to keep safe than ever before," he told her. "Be sure I'll take no unnecessary chances."

Before he left, he'd allowed Cristos access to the deepest recesses of his mind, a guarantee that they could keep tabs on him. Chana couldn't tell, from her connection with Josh, that anyone else was there. She found that a little scary.

"You're deeper than anyone else, sweetheart. No one can eavesdrop on us."

She gave him a smile.

"I've told your stepfather you've had food poisoning, but you're a lot better. If he thinks you're sleeping it off, he's less likely to bother you."

It seemed like a good plan and would explain why Josh returned to the house alone. That was the plan, but everyone had doubts.

They could only hope that the ruse would work. If not, Andreas would form their secret weapon. After his powers came in at sunset, the vampire could flash in and out before anyone could set safeguards against him, or even before they became aware of his presence.

When he drove away without her, Chana felt bereft, as though he would never come back. The first time they'd separated since they had committed to each other. It would always be a wrench, whatever the circumstances, but this felt particularly hard. She would never forget it.

Cristos slid his arm around her waist and guided her back in to Simpson's, the store under the Department's offices, one of the largest department stores in San Francisco. "You'll need to buy some basics if you're not going back for a while. You can't go to your apartment. They'll probably be watching."

Chana had never really enjoyed shopping, but she welcomed the distraction today. She bought toiletries, a few T-shirts, a pair of jeans, and a skirt.

Cristos took her to lunch, and they exchanged nothing more than small talk. When she recalled that she needed underwear, he didn't show any embarrassment in the section that held thongs, bras, and a selection of deliciously sexy nightwear. Many men might, but when she remarked on it, he said, "I'm not a monk, Chana. I've done my share of purchases in these places." Probably not a virgin Sorcerer then.

Cristos surprised Chana with his humor and drollery, keeping her amused with harmless stories she didn't know whether to believe or not, of mermaids buying bikinis and leaving the bottoms behind, of vampires looking for crimson negligees. He never slipped up and talked to her when anyone walked within earshot. Impressive that he always knew without looking whenever someone stood nearby. "Of course vampires are the ones obsessed with the image. Most aren't, but a few like to live the life to the full."

"I never believed all those stories," she answered, fingering a little pale blue nothing of a robe, wondering if Josh would like to see her in it. "That's probably why I denied it in myself for so long. It only came out in my dreams. I still don't remember my mother very well, only a few images. I'd hoped to have more once Fabrice had done his magic, but there's still so little."

"She was taken from you when you were very young." Cristos led her farther into the lingerie department, his voice soothing and reasonable. She wasn't so young, but she let the comment pass.

"I'm not sure I like the way you put that." To hear the event described so enigmatically made her pause.

"We don't know any more." Cristos reached for a shell pink negligee, and Chana had the feeling he avoided looking at her. The gown and robe were of cheap, ribbed fabric, very shiny, trimmed with lace that didn't quite match in color. Not everything in this store was as delicious as the blue robe she'd almost decided to buy. "Don't get your hopes up. She might be dead, just as you say. In human form, shape-shifters are as vulnerable as anyone else to illness and disease. You can only shake those off by shape-shifting, and if your mother couldn't do it, for the same reasons as you, then pneumonia could have carried her off." He dropped the gruesome object and turned to face her. "I'm sorry."

She began to know Cristos a little. Typical of him not to avoid the truth, or to refuse to make an apology he didn't mean. Sadness resided in his eyes, understanding that nearly undid her.

She opened her mouth to reply, but just as the first syllable passed her lips, a deafening blast took away her words and most of her breath. A rumbling roar and exploding glass, as windows blew in and flames licked at the silks and nylons of the lingerie.

Panic lanced through her, but before she could run, before her frozen vocal cords regained their power to scream, something hit her hard, bearing her down to the floor.

Cristos covered her, his heavy body smothering her in fabric and protective flesh. She smelled his aftershave, light and elusive, incongruous in this instant war zone.

"Everybody get down! We're under attack!"

Under attack? This was Simpson's. How could that happen? Numbed by the suddenness of change, Chana couldn't think, could only feel and grope for her reason to return. Thin wails and screams gave way to the fire alarm, its shrill decibels punching clean through her with painful intensity.

Heat grazed her cheek, and a thin flame curled above their heads. Dear God, with all that cheap nylon hanging above them, they could go up like a torch.

She rolled, taking Cristos off-balance and forcing him away from the rack of underwear. He glanced up, then back at her and gave her a brief nod when he saw the now melting fabric, the bags containing her new purchases burning merrily, the heavy drips of molten nylon coming from the cheap pink negligee. Cristos lifted himself clear of her, crouching on all fours to peer over her head through the cloud of smoke and debris. "Our offices must have been the target."

Chana heard a voice in her head, on the main pathways. Cristos must hear it too.

"Where are you?"

She saw a picture of their position, vividly depicted, like a photograph, and then, where heat struck her face, a dark presence appeared to shield her.

"What happened?" Andreas, the vampire, seemed as collected as his boss, staring around at the screaming women racing for the elevators.

"Someone or something has hit the department. I'd suspect dragons."

"Or missiles," Andreas said grimly. "Were you upstairs?" Cristos got to his feet, brushing off his trousers, seemingly indifferent to the blistering heat that scorched Chana's skin and made it difficult to breathe. Should she shape-shift? Would she be better as a griffin? What about the poor people who didn't have that option? Around her the combined screaming of the fire alarm and the others caught in the maelstrom almost deafened her.

Andreas kept his voice low and steady, pitching it so they could hear him. "I was in the restaurant around the corner with Fabrice, having a late lunch. I've

called all the shape-shifters I can find. They'll do their best to get everybody out. The vamps will join in as soon as they can after sundown."

Cristos turned to her, his hand outstretched. "Kanchana, go with Andreas now." His voice held no tinge of request. It was as good as an order.

"What about you?" Unlike Andreas, she had to yell to make herself heard.

"I'll be fine. Andreas, come back for me later." Cristos looked around at the crowds, much thinner now, everyone heading for the exits. So much for controlled exits in the event of fire. Most were screaming; all were running, shopping bags and purses abandoned in the mad dash for the doors.

Andreas took her hand. "Come with me." She did so, to a smashed window. The air seemed thick here, and she recognized it as fuzzing. A great red-gold creature waited patiently, several unconscious people already on its back, its wings keeping a gentle hover. Chana shrank back, but Andreas pushed her forward. "Get on his back."

Shaking, holding back her tears and panic, Chana climbed out the window and on to the creature's back. She didn't look down. Andreas climbed on after her.

The unconscious people were tied to the creature, with a makeshift mixture of ropes, belts and other items. She held on, numbly doing as they told her, and closed her eyes. A cool wind whooshed around them, past her hands, refreshing on her poor, burned face until, with a thump, they landed on the roof of a tall building some distance away from Union Square. They fuzzed to prevent anyone seeing anything but the air ambulance the creature projected in its mind. She almost fell off the shifter's back, to be swept up by Andreas and dumped in a wheelchair. She felt like a piece of luggage but knew this was the best thing she could do. She couldn't help right now. A newly converted shape-shifter would probably prove more of a liability. She'd do the best thing in the circumstances, swallow her pride, let them take her to a place of safety and regroup.

Andreas wheeled her into the hotel and then along a corridor to a room. The door opened with a quiet click and closed behind her. Chana got to her feet.

She stood in the center of a large hotel suite, the carpet soft under her feet. Andreas flicked a smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. "All right? I'll leave you with Diane. I need to check on the situation and get back." The haunted look in his eyes told her everything he didn't say. People were dead and trapped on those floors above Simpson's. Chana glanced around and saw Cristos's assistant, leaf green hair incongruous in this situation.

She swallowed away her fear and nodded. "Go."

He went. One minute he was there. Then he had gone, racing out the room.

Diane gave her a tight smile. "You're in Cristos's hotel room. I wasn't at the office when the strike came. I was here." She didn't say why, and Chana found herself wondering if Diane and Cristos were more than boss and PA. Not that it mattered now. "The stairs and elevators in the store are completely blocked. We've called what shape-shifters we can find, and we're working overtime fuzzing minds

and getting everyone out.” Her face turned bleak and grave, a tragic contrast to her cheerful efficiency when Chana had first seen her. “The attack was sudden, but whoever did it knew exactly where to strike.” She stepped closer. Frowning, she studied Chana’s face. “That looks nasty. You’re a shape-shifter, aren’t you? Well, you’d better change your form. Otherwise you’ll blister.”

“What?” Chana looked around. Everything was happening too fast. The explosion had stunned her senses, making her feel stupid and completely numb. She stood in a bedroom, the bed neatly turned down, the light to the room beyond switched on. She followed Diane into the spacious bathroom and stood in front of the full-length mirror.

She gasped. One side of her face was raw with burns. Skin hung off in shreds. Why hadn’t she felt it? Her clothes were ruined, the blouse torn off her shoulder, the pants smeared all down one side with ashes, blood, and other, unidentifiable stains. But she was here and alive.

Now she felt the burn. Shock must have cushioned the pain before. And Diane was right. Blisters began to swell up as she watched. Diane spoke from behind her. “Shape-shift. If you do that, you’ll heal much, much faster.”

“I don’t know if I can.” Her lips were swelling up now, and she found it harder to speak.

“Try.” The urgency in Diane’s tone told her more than anything else she had to do it and now. She took off the watch that her stepfather had given her and concentrated.

To her surprise, the fur began to form immediately, pricking as it pierced through her skin, and she felt her bones and muscles elongate and re-form. She tried to speak, but couldn’t.

She couldn’t regulate her size. When she’d done that before, Josh had regulated it for her, and she hadn’t the least idea how to go about it. She had no choice but to see what happened.

Her head hit the ceiling, and she had to bend, but to her relief, she fit.

Diane spoke from the door. “A griffin. How marvelous! I’ve never seen one before. Stay like that for an hour at least. Then we’ll see how you’re getting on.”

How could she feel so practical in the face of so much change? Shape-shifting had freaked Chana out completely, and she’d been the person doing it.

Low murmurs and the occasional shout told her more people had arrived in the other room. Someone—no one she knew—stuck her head around the door. “Want some help with that size?”

She couldn’t even nod. She felt like Alice, too big for her surroundings, wondering which piece of mushroom to nibble.

The newcomer asked to speak to her, mind to mind. A feminine voice, brisk and clear.

“I’m a basilisk. Would you like me to help?”

"Yes, please."

Immediately she saw how the trick was done, as though someone held a book open at the right page in front of her. She just had to follow the instructions, which appeared a lot clearer than self-build furniture.

She tried, and it worked, so she found she could reduce her size to something more manageable, the size of a child.

"Thanks."

"That's okay. Were you there?"

"I was in the store below. What was it like upstairs?"

She felt a mental shudder. *"Unbelievable. They got us with our pants down. There must have been at least fifty people there. God knows how many got out."*

Someone else waddled into the bathroom and looked at her. A serpentlike creature, with wings. The two legendary monsters looked at each other, and the griffin felt the other smile. *"Were you hurt too?"*

"Yes. My arm broke, and I got burned. Pretty bad but it should be okay soon. It doesn't hurt too much anymore. You?"

"Burned, but it's weird. I can actually feel it getting better."

"You're the new griffin, aren't you? The one the English griffin brought in."

"Yes. The hit might have been because of me."

The creature regarded her solemnly through large, black eyes. *"It wasn't you. You can't help being what you are, any more than the rest of us can. You're not the cause. Never think that."*

She walked toward Chana and touched her with the tip of a tiny, extended wing. *"Try to get some sleep. All hell will break loose soon. Again."*

"Excuse me, but that isn't going to help me sleep."

A small chuckle. *"Let me help?"*

She gave unspoken permission, too weary to protest any longer. A wave of lethargy swept over her, making her limbs heavy, her eyelids impossible to keep open. With a whispered *"Thanks,"* she fell asleep.

* * *

A sound from the next room made Chana open her eyes. For a moment, she thought she remained in the dream, a comforting vision that rapidly left her as she came to a sense of where she was.

Warm bodies surrounded her, some furry, some feathered, none of them human. She moved, and felt the shape-shifting as her companions adjusted themselves, some stirring awake.

A voice disturbed their peace. *"Those of you who can attend, Cristos is holding a meeting in the conference room at the end of this corridor. He's hired the whole wing here, so you needn't be afraid of meeting anyone who doesn't belong."*

She glanced at her companions, wondering how on earth she got here, when exactly had her life taken this bizarre turn, feeling like a character in a fairy tale.

The small creatures scattered, moving apart. Then they shape-shifted. Chana emulated them, feeling the bones change shape, the fur recede, a sensation almost impossible to describe.

Watching the others, belatedly she realized she'd be naked when she completed her change, but now the process had started, she couldn't stop it. Horror and embarrassment filled her with heat, but she had to endure.

Most of the other creatures completed the transformation before she did, but they waited for her to catch up with them. How she wished they hadn't.

Now about a dozen people filled the bathroom, some with wounds seeping blood, pink edges showing the newly healed cuts, some yellowed bruises, as though weeks old instead of hours.

Although she tried very hard, when she got to her feet, her arms went in front of her, shielding her nakedness. Someone chuckled and threw her a bathrobe. "Here, put this on. You'll get used to it."

"Is it obvious to everybody that I'm new at this?"

A few people smiled. None of them tried to hide their nudity. None seemed discomfited by it. "In our society we have to spend a fair amount of time naked. Either that or lose a shirt every time. How come you're not used to it?"

She looked at the man who had spoken. Like the others, a magnificent specimen of humanity, long, dark hair reaching to a slim waist, narrow hips... She looked up hastily to meet his broad smile. "My stepfather kept me dosed up on Cephalox, and I didn't even know until recently." She forced herself to let her arms drop to her sides, noticing that his gaze didn't immediately go to her breasts or her crotch, as she'd half expected.

His eyes remained fixed on her face. "Jesus, you're the griffin, aren't you? Cristos is bound to want you at this meeting."

She bit her lip. "Yes, I'm the griffin."

"I'm sorry." He seemed entirely serious.

It had been so long since she'd received sympathy from anyone that she could hardly believe it. The Department had been targeted, people must have died in the attack, and he thought of her dilemma.

He took her hand, the warmth of friendly contact nearly bringing her to tears. "We're in this together. Come on. Let's see what's up." She picked up her watch with her free hand and slipped it in the pocket of the robe.

He helped her slip her arms through the sleeves of the robe before they followed the others out of the small bathroom to where people were filing through the outer door of the suite and up the corridor.

Just as well Cristos had booked the floor, because her companion, a man she discovered was Kevin, a serpent shape-shifter, wasn't the only naked person to file

into the room. He took a robe from a pile just inside the door of the conference room and shrugged into it. Only then did she realize he must have lost his clothes in the explosion, probably burned or torn off him by the power of the attack. Her mind seemed to catch up with her, assimilating, taking in what had just happened, although the numbness of shock wouldn't leave her for a while.

Cristos stood at the end of the room, tapping his foot against the parquet floor, waiting for them to settle, but he didn't have to wait long. A person didn't have to be psychic to feel the tension and fierce anger permeating the air, but everyone here had some degree of psi ability. Around fifty people filled this large room, and when many of them were Talents, it made for an uncomfortable fit.

Chana concentrated on keeping her mental abilities locked away tight, as much out of respect for other people as to keep her thoughts private. She stood to one side with a group of other people wearing hotel bathrobes and listened to Cristos. None of the urbane sophisticate remained. Only a warrior, a general waiting to brief his troops. He wore clothes he'd obviously thrown on for convenience, but they still matched, were immaculately ironed. His eyes didn't have the kind expression she now knew they could. They looked as hard as the blade of a sword, his mouth straight and thinned with strain. He scanned the room efficiently.

"You know what happened. We've been targeted. By whom we don't yet know, though we have our suspicions. With what is easier. A missile of some kind, nothing paranormal." A slight murmur arose, but Cristos ignored it. "Our people are on it. And I don't mean the Department 57 people. I'm talking FBI, with Homeland Security not far behind them. The minute any foreign involvement is confirmed, the CIA will be sniffing around. So be careful. We've removed all evidence of Talents because there'll be people of a low security level around. We need them on our side, so don't any of you antagonize them. They'll want to talk to all of us." He glanced around the room again, his gaze lingering on Chana a fraction longer than on the others.

"How did they find us?" Kevin asked.

Cristos grimaced. "A tracker. Probably in a cell phone or a piece of personal jewelry, something like that."

Chana gasped, and everyone around her stared. "It was me, wasn't it?" Her watch, the one her stepfather had given her last Christmas. He'd used it to keep close tabs on her.

She took her watch out of her pocket and shoved it across the table to him. She'd liked it, a simple gold design, but she handed it over. "I never want to see it again."

Cristos heaved a heavy sigh and ran a well-manicured hand through his short-cropped hair. "I'll deactivate it and send it to Evans in our New York office. He has a direct link to the computers here." He grimaced. "It was a sophisticated device. We're set up to detect all bugs in the department, but this one passed unnoticed. It could have been anyone, Chana. It just happened to be you."

"Does that mean—" She couldn't finish the sentence.

Cristos nodded. "Oh yes. You didn't say it out loud, but I think most people here heard. You're not too skilled in blocking your thoughts yet. Your stepfather. Somehow he's involved, though I don't know if he's the instigator or a patsy. I suspect a bit of both."

To her surprise, people didn't move away from her. She would have, if she could have. She heard Kevin's gentle sigh. "They want what we've got, or they want to get rid of us. Which group was this?"

"The scientists. There's a lab somewhere close, very well shielded."

A female voice from the other side of the room piped up. "Why would they want to hit us?"

"To take us off guard and to snatch what they could. More likely to slow us down. We intercepted a group of people disguised as firefighters trying to remove certain items. Computers, some paperwork."

"They're dead?"

"No, merely under the illusion that the equipment and paper they have is what they found in the Department. More useful that way."

A chuckle rippled around the room, and some of the tension eased.

"They hit us, then sent a team in to retrieve equipment. And people. Dead or alive." When Cristos's expression turned grave, the room fell silent. "We lost five. Three Talents, two mortals. The store lost another five on the top floor, which took the impact. So if they wanted to hit Talents only, as the PHR claim, it was remarkably unsuccessful."

Hot tears flooded Chana's eyes, and she dashed them away, but more followed. She wasn't the only person in tears, but her guilt, the sorrow washed through her, and she knew she would never lose it. These people had died because something she'd carried with her had told the enemy where to find them.

Cristos picked up a remote control, hefting it in his hand before switching on the large flat-screen TV behind him. The news blared out into the near silence.

Simpson's had become a disaster area, yellow tape sectioning it off, the normal bustle of an ordinary shopping day replaced by haphazardly parked television vans and emergency service vehicles. Behind the reporter stood another, talking into a different camera, and behind that firemen and paramedics scurried about. Smoke still billowed from the upper levels of the building.

The reporter spoke rapidly, in taut, short sentences. "The missile struck late morning. The authorities have as yet no idea who made the strike or why, but because of the nature of the attack, Al-Qaeda is at the forefront of suspects. Already, several suspects have been taken into custody."

Cristos turned the sound down to only just audible. "Look for the obvious or set up a smokescreen. Because Al-Qaeda is suspected, the authorities can bring the specialist units in to the scene. They're a buzz word, one the agencies can use. That means the CIA can get a foot in the door. Which they will. I'll send some of you in under that cover. You're supposedly communications experts, so you can play on

that. But I want you to make sure there's no sign of any activity by Talents anywhere in that building. We'll regroup, re-form somewhere else, but for now I've designated a few safe areas. One of them is *not* this hotel. Diane is booking rooms in hotels all over the city, from luxury class to motels. I want you all to take one, even if you're a resident here. Until we've checked over your place, you're under orders not to return there."

Murmurs followed, but no one dissented. "If I don't call you in the next few hours, leave the city for a safe place if you have one. And I know most of you do. I'll draw up a list of operatives I need to stay and let you know as soon as I can." He paused and glanced at the screen, but Chana felt her body tense, as though Cristos was avoiding saying something.

For the first time since the attack, she tried to contact Josh. Her senses flooded back, and she knew that until that moment, she'd been in shock, dealing with each moment as it came. Was that her natural, shape-shifter's way of coping, or just the way she coped naturally? She'd spent so much of her life under the influence of a drug she didn't even know about, she couldn't tell.

She couldn't find Josh. Nowhere. He'd have come at the first explosion, when her mind had blazed out in alarm, but he hadn't come. He wasn't here. He wasn't anywhere.

As she began to panic, she heard Cristos's voice, as though it came from a great distance. "Also, I think the enemy has been planning to take a particular person. We know that a griffin shape-shifter, Laurie Friedland, has been missing for some time, and his brother came here to search for him. Well, it seems they have him too. Josh Friedland has disappeared. Please can someone catch Kanchana? I think she's about to faint."

Chapter Fourteen

Josh moaned. At least he was still alive. He hadn't meant to make any noise, but the control needed seemed beyond him. Weakness coursed through his body, his blood running sluggishly through his veins.

He forced his eyes open and blinked.

He saw a plain white ceiling, totally devoid of ornament, but so gleaming white it was probably new. Turning his head he found he lay on a bed. Movement made his head spin, so he closed his eyes again, trying to regain his equilibrium. Something felt wrong, deep inside.

When he reached for Chana, he couldn't find her. His breath hitched, but he couldn't do anything to stop the rising panic attack, hadn't any way of stopping it. Until he heard a voice, one he'd longed to hear for some time now.

"Hey, take it easy, bro. Look at me."

He opened his eyes again.

On a narrow hospital bed, dressed in a paper surgical gown, tubes running out of most of the parts of his body, lay Laurie.

"Oh fuck, Laurie, where have you been?"

Laurie grimaced in that half-comical, half-regretful expression Josh had missed so much. "Here. All the time."

"Where's here?"

All the humor went out of his brother's expression. "Fucked if I know."

"I was in San Francisco. In Skeffington's house and—I can't quite remember."

"Don't try. They knocked you out, probably in a drink or something like that. That's how they got me." His eyes widened in alarm as Josh moved. "No, no don't. If you disconnect any of these tubes, they'll be straight in here. An alarm goes off somewhere."

"What's in them?"

"Cephalox, for sure. I haven't been able to shape-shift, except for the once, and that time they were ready for me. They wanted to see me shape-shift, to be sure they had what they thought."

Josh lay back, his head swimming. "How did they take you?"

"A babe, a really hot babe—"

"What did she look like? What was her name?"

"Justine. Tall, leggy, blonde. Just how I like 'em. She said she had an acting job in LA, and did I want a week in San Francisco before she went. I said yeah, and they took me right off the plane. Didn't even get her in the sack." He made a sound of disgust.

Josh breathed out slowly. "Not Chana."

"Who's Chana?"

He might have known Laurie would pick up on his thought. "The woman I love. George Skeffington's stepdaughter."

"Whoa. She got you in here?"

"No. Laurie, can they eavesdrop on our thoughts?"

"Probably." But Josh felt a stirring, deep, deep down, and he let Laurie in at that level. Nobody could read them there. The connection they'd established from the beginning. If that wasn't secure, they were in such serious trouble it hardly bore thinking about.

"She's a shape-shifter, Laurie, but she didn't know until recently. Skeffington kept her dosed on Cephalox, told her it was insulin for her diabetes. She's not diabetic. Her attacks were her body's way of rebelling against the lack of shape-shifting."

"Jesus, I knew he had something to do with it."

"What can we do?"

Laurie shifted restlessly. *"I've tried a few things. So far, nada. One of the drugs is weakening me, so I don't even have my human strength."*

Laurie was bigger than Josh, a midfielder on the football field, with great body power. Josh's strengths were his speed and agility. If Laurie had lost his strength, Josh knew why he felt unusually clumsy. Not to mention lethargic. Some kind of tranquillizer, he guessed.

"So what do we do?"

"I think they wanted us both. They've put us in together for a reason. Let's talk, not let them know we're communicating inside."

Sensible. Josh thought of something they could both discuss without too much trouble. "Do you think they came up with the idea of Princess Leia being Luke's sister after the first film?"

The hours they'd spent discussing *Star Wars* had become a joke, and Laurie's obsession with the Princess Leia character even more so. A tried and true discussion, something they didn't have to concentrate on. He only half heard Laurie's reply, "Well, there are some indications in the first film..." and he let his mind drift down, down, down, where they could talk privately.

They'd both been taken near San Francisco, so perhaps they were still close. But neither brother knew how long they'd been unconscious.

"Who are they?"

"Scientists for sure. They want to know what makes us shape-shifters, if they can bottle it."

"Cristos thinks they want to breed us."

"Wouldn't be surprised. They might want to breed pure. There aren't too many griffins about, and now they have three."

"Why would they want both of us?"

"Sibling experiments."

Shit, that made sense. Since every shape-shifter couple could only have two shape-shifter children, that made complete sense. Breeding pure didn't matter, because the children became either one thing or the other. So if a vampire hooked up with a dragon, the children would become either dragon or vampire at puberty, not some weird hybrid. But maybe the scientists' information didn't stretch that far.

"What have they done to you?"

Drugs. Laurie gave another disgusted sound. *"They've taken samples of everything. Blood, bone, piss, semen—they've had it all."*

"Any operations?"

"Those too."

A cold hand of fear clutched Josh's heart. He'd only had one, in a specialist unit, and he'd never forgotten the panic as he was going under, waking up in a blind funk and trying to shape-shift, finding himself unable to. Of course, he'd had Cephalox for the procedure, a legitimate use of the drug. Now one of the tubes inserted in his body no doubt fed him the stuff again. He felt Laurie's soothing presence and sent him an unspoken reassurance he was far from feeling.

"We have to get out of here. Cristos is in San Francisco."

The door opened.

"Good morning, gentlemen."

Laurie stared. Josh swore.

"Well, not exactly the response I expected for reuniting you. But it will do."

George Skeffington, incongruously dressed in a brown tailored suit and tie, strolled into the room and stood between the two beds. He smiled broadly. "Just as I always dreamed. Brothers. Your DNA will tell me much more together than they will apart." No, it wouldn't. Or perhaps they'd discovered something in their DNA studies. Perhaps these people had discovered a missing link, something that made Talents what they were. Studies, by Talents and others, hadn't managed to find any differences.

Josh sighed. "What can you possibly gain by doing this?"

Skeffington grinned, baring yellowed teeth. "Immortality."

"Huh?" The brothers looked at each other.

"You won't get that from us."

"Oh no?" George snapped his fingers, and someone else entered the room. A young man in another business suit, holding a briefcase. He handed George some glossies, and George held them up. "I have some photos of you both. They go back as far as the invention of photography. I have been collecting data on you for some time, so don't bother to deny it. I even had a grave exhumed. As I expected, it was empty."

"He's mad." Laurie gave Josh a resigned glance. "And you did all this because we have a strong resemblance to our ancestors?"

"I've had your DNA analyzed."

Josh wanted to shrug, but he couldn't muster the energy.

George smiled. "It corresponds to the DNA from a museum piece, some hair encased in a locket, taken from a collection belonging to a World War One pilot's lover. Impeccable provenance. I bought the whole collection from the woman's granddaughter."

Josh remembered that time, and his heart sank, though he was careful not to let his expression show. He'd lost track of that locket and, since DNA testing hadn't been dreamed of then, had thought it didn't matter too much.

Apparently not. "Is that what you call evidence?"

"That and others."

Josh thought of all the envelopes he'd licked, all the lovers he'd had. But surely DNA in that form couldn't last that long? He wished he knew more.

"I don't have enough for a court of law, it's true, but I do have enough to be sure. I want what you have, boys. Give it to me, and I'll let you go free."

"No. Way." Laurie gritted his teeth, and his body went taut.

George opened his palm to reveal a small device. "You both have one of these attached to interesting parts of your body. At the end of the catheters. Inside."

God!

In the next few minutes, Josh realized there was a lot to be said for unconsciousness.

* * *

It took every ounce of control Chana had not to despair, not to give up and mourn her loss. Josh had seeped into her soul. He belonged to her, a part of her, and without him, she wasn't even half a person anymore.

But she forced herself and went on. Searching his room, searching her room for some clue, anything. Andros remained a silent, menacing figure by her side. Once he touched her arm. "I feel some of your pain, and I'm sorry. You've bonded with him."

"Something happened. That's for sure."

"When couples are very close, they bond. You've done that, or you've gone some way toward it. He's probably missing you the same way."

She swallowed a sob. "If he's alive."

Andreas said nothing but turned aside to look through the last drawer in Josh's bedside table.

No clue. Andreas took a phone call, but apart from a few terse yes's and no's, he didn't say much. He hung up and gave his attention to Chana.

"Anushka's with George. She's been shopping in town, and he's bringing her home. Anushka's doing everything she can to let George realize she's a Talent, without actually shape-shifting. Giving him a chance to take her. If he doesn't take the bait, then I get her out of here, and it's up to you. Fabrice is tracking her from San Francisco, so we should be able to get a clear triangulation if they do take her." He smiled at Chana. "Don't worry. Anushka is a trained operative. She can take care of herself."

"So could Josh."

Andreas's mouth tightened. "Yep. And Laurie. We'll get them back, Chana. For your sake and for the sake of all Talents, we'll get them back."

He didn't say "Dead or alive." He didn't have to.

They'd bugged her room. She hated that, that Andreas had found listening devices of long-standing in her private room. All deactivated. Perhaps Josh had done that. She and Andreas went downstairs, and she provided them both with a drink, one neither of them wanted. Until Andreas straightened up. *"They're on their way back. Anushka's had no luck, so it's down to you, Chana."*

She didn't tense. This meant, at least, that she'd see Josh again.

When George came home, his arm slung casually around Anushka's waist, Andreas met them with a roar and a strong Russian accent. "Where have you been? What did you mean by walking out on me?"

Anushka leaped, her large eyes even wider with shock. "Andreas! I-I wasn't expecting you."

Chana heard the message Andreas sent to Anushka. *"We need to get you out of here. I'm your boyfriend, come to collect you."*

From then on, they conversed in Russian. Chana knew because she heard the rapid mental instructions Anushka sent him, and the way he picked up and said the words almost at the same time he heard them. She conducted the argument, both sides of it, acting shocked, then angry, then contrite, and ending up in Andreas's arms, sharing a passionate kiss.

He murmured endearments in Russian, and she cooed her response before "becoming aware" of their audience. George, Junior, Chana, and a couple of domestics gawked at the scene between the fiery-haired Russian aristocrat and her dark-haired, brooding lover. They could have lit up the screen, had they been in a movie studio in LA.

Not once did they look Chana's way, but she heard Anushka's farewells in her head, and her encouragement. *"I think he knows I'm a Talent, but he didn't take the*

bait. He probably suspects Andreas too. I hope you get Josh back, Chana. Be strong for us all."

Only one person she had to be strong for. Josh.

Andreas swept out, his arm possessively encircling Anushka, and shortly afterward they heard the sound of a powerful car engine start and then fade into the distance.

"Well!" Junior exclaimed. "That girl was beautiful but trouble. You're better out of that one, Dad."

"Hmm." George stared out the window. "Maybe. I think something spooked her, and she sent for him. Anyhow, she's gone." He turned away as though he'd never met Anushka. Chana had seen him do that before, dismiss someone as though she'd never existed. She wished he'd do it to her, but he never had.

"Can I have a word, George? A private word?"

George fixed her with his stony stare. "I think so, Kanchana. I want to talk to you too. Come on, Junior, you might as well be in on this."

"No. It doesn't concern Junior." How could she give voice to her suspicions with him there? Junior, the bumbling idiot, Skeffington's tool in every way possible.

"It might."

George's voice held no room for discussion, so she followed him. She'd dressed in a pair of pants and a neat top, with a jacket over. They'd give her bugs, tiny devices, state of the art, Cristos told her. Where telepathy couldn't go, perhaps more conventional methods could succeed. She decided to let George take the lead. She needed to discover Josh's whereabouts, but she couldn't be sure which approach would get her the result she desperately yearned for. Nothing mattered as much as that. Nothing.

George took his time sitting at his desk, settling himself and watching Junior find a chair for Chana, waiting until she felt comfortable before finding a seat for himself. Chana set her teeth.

"I noticed you did not bring our guest home with you," Skeffington said. "Has he wandered away to pastures new?"

"He's disappeared. I was in Simpson's this afternoon, shopping, when the attack happened."

Junior hissed. At least someone cared about her. George just watched her. She improvised, praying it would work.

"A man from the FBI got me in an office and asked me some very pointed questions. That's why I was late. That's why I lost sight of Josh. Right after the attack on Simpson's, the agent came and found me, and made it clear they suspect you're involved. They knew Josh had gone, and they said he might have been kidnapped."

"What did you say?" George rapped out the question and next to her, she felt her stepbrother stiffen.

"Nothing. What could I say?" Time to take this up a level. "George, you said you wanted me to be your hostess, to arrange social matters for you. I can't do that properly if you don't tell me what's going on, can I? If you just trusted me more, I wouldn't have found myself questioned by the authorities this afternoon. What gives?" She let her voice rise a little, her temper let loose, just for a moment.

"Something went wrong this afternoon. I still have to find out what." Skeffington sounded so reasonable, she knew he was close to the edge. It helped her to control her rising anxiety, so dangerously near to temper.

"You're telling her too much." Junior sounded sullen.

"Shut the fuck up, Junior. It's time. Chana, you're coming with me to see Josh. Okay?"

Easier than she'd thought. "Okay."

A soft knock on the door, and a soft word from an aide heralded the arrival of the transport. Her heart rose, and she felt slightly sick. The pampered stepdaughter of a business tycoon didn't expect to go into dangerous situations, and she knew enough to realize Skeffington could be lying. He'd told her once how he could lie so effectively. "Believe it," he'd said. "Make yourself believe the lie." He could be taking her to her death, without seeing anybody. She had to force the issue. So the thoughts of sincerity she could see in the forefront of his mind could be lies too.

Head held high, Chana made her way out to the waiting car. Junior didn't go with them. The knowledge pounded through her. Junior cared for her, in his way, so not bringing him could signal her death knell. Well, she knew how to fight now, and she could shape-shift.

The car had tinted windows, and Chana knew she had to do something. "So what's this about, George? Why did you have my room bugged? Why throw Josh at me?" At her stepfather's crooked brow, she explained. "I'm not stupid. It's obvious you wanted us to hook up."

George grinned and leaned back. "You went to Department 57 this afternoon. Don't bother denying it, I know where you went. So you know what Josh is."

"Maybe. What do you want, George?"

"A cure, sweetie. A cure for your illness." So he still believed she thought she had diabetes. "These people have the key. I want you well."

Like fuck he did. George cared for nobody but himself. But she had an advantage, a slender one. He didn't know she could shape-shift, didn't know she knew her true nature.

Half an hour later, they arrived, just as the hot day was beginning to fade into dusk. Situated in the middle of nowhere, the facility appeared like one of those featureless buildings spotted at a distance from the highway, idly wondered about, and then forgotten. Only they took the narrow road from the highway that led to the building. As they approached, the steel gates opened, and they passed through. The security people checked them, thorough but discreet. With her heightened senses, she felt the invisible electronic field, one then another, making the little

hairs on her neck lift. She held her breath as they passed through, but nothing happened. No alarms. Cristos had been right. The doors to the facility looked normal from the outside, but the wood only veneered metal slabs three inches thick. The car paused inside the gates, in front of another pair, while they were scanned again. The second set of doors opened, and a blast of tangy, sterile disinfectant smell assailed her nostrils through the window Skeffington had opened to wave at the cameras.

Like a hospital or a dentist's office, clinically clean.

"Time to get out." Skeffington had driven them, an unusual arrangement. He preferred not to drive himself, using the time to do paperwork or talk to colleagues. Sometimes he held high security meetings in the back of a large limo, safer than talking in a building, which could be targeted by long-range listening devices. If he had many secrets like this, Chana wasn't surprised at the attention to secrecy.

She didn't wait for one of George's minions to open the door, but reached for the handle and got out by herself. People in white coats approached her, converging like birds of prey on a fresh victim. Chana fought down her instinctive terror. They knew her true nature, but while here with Skeffington, they wouldn't touch her. That might change but not yet.

"This is my stepdaughter. She might volunteer to help us, but you are not to touch her without her permission. She's the reason we're here, on the brink of great discoveries. Treat her with the same respect as you would treat me." He would say that if he regarded her as breeding stock. He turned to hold out his hand, beckoning impatiently. "We'll see how our new resident is getting on. Anything to report, Dr. Jones?" He turned to a thin, ascetic looking man carrying a clipboard.

Chana fell into step with the pair. She didn't want the listeners at Department 57 to miss anything. She put out a gentle probe on the channel Cristos had shown her, and she felt nothing. Nothing came back to her. This place was telepathy proof. They'd expected it but hoped for some break. She left her channels open, to Cristos and the deeper, more intimate one to Josh, praying there might be gaps somewhere.

"The older patient is showing definite signs of weakness," said the man dispassionately. "It doesn't seem to be recovering as fast. The second arrived just in time to save the experiment. We've hooked it up to the machines. It fought hard, even in its unconscious state, but it can't fight now."

Chana wanted to ask what they'd done, but rage suffused her, and she couldn't speak. They called them "it"? Were they just subnormal things to experiment on? She concentrated on keeping her expression one of mild interest, deliberately working to relax the muscles that tightened when fury took her.

The man glanced at her. Could he read her? As they passed closed doors she got senses, twinges of awareness and, once or twice, cries for help. Josh and Laurie weren't the only Talents held here against their will. But she couldn't reach outside the facility, however hard she tried. She prayed the bugs were working.

They passed a junction of two corridors, and it felt like a door opened on to the outside world, a flash of telepathy, just for a moment. She stumbled, allowed herself to fall right on the spot.

This must be a weak juncture. Whatever the cause, she could communicate here.

When the doctor bent down to help her, she let her purse fall open, exclaiming lightly in irritation. Jones set to picking her things up while she nursed her ankle. "I'll be okay in a minute," she said with a rueful smile. "Just an ankle twist."

The doctor bent to examine her, and she stretched her foot out for him before concentrating on the commotion inside her head. She opened her mind completely, then shut out the calls that came from close by. One sharp effort, a distance call. "*Cristos, there are many Talents here. Get here.*"

The response came instantly, firm and clear. "*We have a GPS fix. Get out of there as soon as you can. I'm sending in a team.*"

"You seem to be fine," Dr. Jones said to her. Chana concentrated on not kicking out at the man. Instead, she allowed the doctor to help her up.

She made a show of testing her foot. "It's good to go."

They walked on, slowly at first, until she put her full weight on the leg and walked more confidently. Whatever Cristos said, she wouldn't leave until she'd seen Josh. And she wanted them to exit this building together. Or she wanted a shot at it.

This place appeared like any small private hospital. Doors open to the carpeted corridor showed private rooms, decorated in quiet shades, with beds, TVs, pictures on the walls, all empty. There were more closed doors than open ones. When they turned up yet another corridor, she spotted the open door to an office. Probably where the guards hung out. Less a hospital, more like a prison.

At the end of this corridor, the doctor led them through two sets of doors, each opened by the doctor's thumb and retinal print. Chana gritted her teeth. Great. They'd need him to get out.

A pair of guards stood on either side of a door, their nondescript navy blue uniforms indicating a private security service. Chana suspected she was the only government agent on the whole property. Usually a high-security place like this swarmed with government agents and representatives of all kinds. Not here.

"Kanchana?"

She blinked and realized Skeffington was talking to her.

"Are you ready to go inside?"

"Yeah, sure."

She swallowed and lowered her chin to disguise her reaction, wishing she had an empty stomach.

Stepping through the door, she saw two beds. Although she'd steeled herself, the sight still came as a profound shock, pushing bile into her throat and making the small hairs on the back of her neck rise.

Josh lay in the bed nearest the window, which looked out on to a featureless courtyard. He had his eyes closed. Sweat darkened his hair, and a damp mark showed on the pillow where he'd tossed his head restlessly. Thick leather straps held his arms and legs down, and under the light cover she had to assume his body was strapped down too.

The moment she stepped into the room, she reached out to him mentally, at the deep level they'd connected at before, forcing her hands open against the fists she wanted to form, blinking hard to ensure no tears fell. Nothing.

In the other narrow metal hospital bed lay a man who must have been Josh's brother, Laurie. They shared an unmistakable resemblance unmistakable, although Laurie seemed slightly larger, his body bulkier. Someone had roughly cropped his hair short, and he was similarly restrained. He looked pale, almost dead, red marks showing livid against the pearly skin where he'd struggled in the early days of his captivity. The marks had almost healed.

At first she thought Josh lay unconscious. Then she felt a stirring deep, deep down in her mind.

He opened his eyes and stared at her, his expression full of hatred. "Bitch!"

She jumped back as if he'd shot her. "Josh, I-I—"

She turned her head to see Skeffington smiling at her. The sight chilled her blood. Had they told him she'd helped to capture him? Did he believe them over her? If he did, he wasn't worth it. He'd demanded trust from her; well, it went two ways.

The stirring deep down turned into words. *"Be careful. They've tapped the telepathy somehow. What are you doing here, sweetheart? Get out and go to Cristos."*

"I'm not going without you. They're on their way. Oh God!"

She'd sent a message to Cristos along the usual channels. Had they heard?

She couldn't ask, but prayed nobody could trace the fissure she'd used. Someone might have planted it there to catch people like her. Perhaps it had been a real break, where psi Talented could send and receive messages in stealth. She had to hope so, but she couldn't do anything about it now.

Josh continued to hurl insults at her until Dr. Jones stepped forward and backhanded him, calmly and without warning. The sound echoed in the still room, and Chana worked hard to conceal her shock and anger.

Dr. Jones spoke into the silence. "I'm sorry, Ms. Rafiz. These aren't real people. They're more like animals." Afterward, he crossed the room to the sink and rinsed off his hand. "We try not to touch them unless we have to. We have no way of knowing what might rub off."

Josh fell silent but glared at Chana and the doctor.

George chuckled. "I guess you've worked out why I bought your little football club? You boys will make my fortune for me."

He turned to the doctor. "So what's the progress?" His eyes gleamed with anticipation. "Anything useful yet?"

"Oh yes. But everything we extract will have to go through clinical trials. You know that." The doctor glanced at Josh. Then his attention flicked to Chana. He didn't seem capable of meeting her eyes. He fidgeted with the pen attached to his clipboard. "We're analyzing everything that comes out of them. We need to preserve them alive for a few more experiments, and then—" He shrugged. "We need to collect more specimens."

"These were expensive," Skeffington growled. Trust him to bring it down to the bottom line. "I can't afford to get any more that way. You said you wanted brothers, that siblings would tell you more. Well, I got them for you, and it cost me."

The doctor nodded.

Chana's fury allowed her to respond in a believable way, but she was mad at the doctor, not Josh. She wanted to kill him. Even when she'd worked for the SFPD she had never felt murderous toward anyone, not like she felt toward this sorry excuse for a human being. No species should feel proud to claim him as one of them.

She strode to the bedside, standing on the far side, where Josh's arm was strapped down and needles passed into his body from various drips. It looked as if she was taking care, moving to the immobile side, but she wanted to see the setup closer too.

"If you can, drag these needles out of me. The poison they're pumping into me is stopping me shape-shifting, and it's sapping my strength. I feel too weak to fight."

"I'll do what I can." It would hurt him, but she could do it. The catheters were bound together once they left Josh's body. A tidy nurse, she guessed. If she could knock over the stand holding the various drips, they would all come out at once. She winced when she realized he was catheterized. That would hurt, coming out.

Outnumbered, and only she could shape-shift. She had to pray they could hold them and that Cristos got here in time.

Skeffington smiled at her. "You can help get us more specimens."

"What makes you think I'll do that?"

His smile broadened. "You care for him. I want babies, children. You can do it the natural way, or we can extract sperm." The doctor cleared his throat, but after giving him a quelling glance, George turned his attention back to her. "You'll do it. I have a deal for you. Stay here for a while, produce progeny, and I'll look after you for the rest of your life." Which wouldn't last very long. Or she'd end up fastened down to one of these tables with tubes coming out of her body.

She saw the tendons tense in Josh's arm and knew it had nothing to do with the cocktail of drugs being pumped into him.

"You'd do that? Your own stepdaughter?"

Staring into her eyes, she saw hesitation and entered his head, at the superficial level, reading him. He would do it, but he would do it very reluctantly. He wanted this more than he'd ever wanted anything else. He loved her, but he loved himself more.

Feeling contaminated, she withdrew. "I don't see why you need so many."

The doctor shrugged. "Contracts to fulfill, experiments to conduct."

Contracts? This research didn't have much commercial viability. Even if they managed to discover something, they had years of clinical trials ahead of them. This would last long-term, and Skeffington rarely thought in those time spans any more.

Contracts?

"The investment here must be huge," she said, moving closer to Josh. "Why don't you look after the ones you have?"

"In the early days, we needed to do a lot of work on anatomy and simple chemical analysis. We thought the difference was in the brain. It might be, but it is probably in the way the brain works, so we need them alive."

Chana felt sick when she realized what the man, in his detached way, was discussing. Killing to dissect. Worse.

Josh moved as though to comfort her, and his arm strained against the leather restraints, the muscles bulging above and below. Normally he could have part shape-shifted and broken out without raising a sweat, but one of those drugs had to be Cephalox.

The quietness in the lab shattered when the door opened with such force it crashed against the wall, revealing a guard, gun in hand. Light gleamed dully along the black barrel pointing at her.

Behind him stood another white-coated man, short, skinny, carrying some kind of electronic device the size of an e-reader. He stepped through the door, careful not to obstruct the guard. "We've intercepted a message from one of you. A mental one."

Josh closed his eyes. "*You used the simple communications channels, didn't you?*"

"*I didn't have much time.*"

"*It's not your fault, sweetheart. We didn't know it was possible. Keep deep. They can only track superficial communication.*"

The white-coated man glared at her. "It had a feminine imprint."

George glared at her, and Dr. Jones stepped forward as though to block any escape she might try to make. "What did it say, Wrightson?"

Wrightson grinned, showing a set of perfectly white teeth. "We can't read the words, but we can pick up transmissions. The electronic web networking this site reacts to them. But now we have definite proof that it can be done, that someone was doing it. We can work with the sender." His cold gaze switched from George to Chana, as inexpressive as a camera.

"I don't want you to hurt her," George said quietly.

"Why not?" Dr. Jones sounded almost pained. "She's not one of us. She's a thing, an animal, just like the ones in those beds. She belongs here."

"If I am, what does that make you?" Chana said, only aware afterward that she sounded just like a little girl taunting her elders.

Dr. Jones sneered. "Your mother wasn't really with it, was she? Now we know why. She was"—he made a sound of disgust in his throat—"one of them."

"I don't want to use her." George met her gaze, and as far as she could tell, with an honest response, perhaps for the only time in his life. "I've fought for my family, worked for you all. One of the reasons for all this, all this work and expense, is to try to cure her." He smiled at her, the sort of smile a man might give to an imbecile. "When did you find out?"

"When Josh told me." She reached for Josh, touched his skin, because she had to.

"Did he take you off the drug?"

She felt Josh's arm twitch under her hand. *"Don't tell him. It's a trap. He wants to know if you can shape-shift."*

Sickeningly, she knew he was right. "I'm not off the drug. Josh said it could be dangerous to come off all at once."

George's shoulders slumped. "Thank God."

Thank God she couldn't change, or that she hadn't tried to go cold turkey? She still didn't know, didn't want to know.

An unearthly scream pierced the quiet, shocking her into tensing. A siren outside, drowning the whole facility in unbearable screaming. Then the public address system cut in, blaring, "We're under attack!"

George turned for the door. "Kill them if you have to. Kill all the creatures. Not my stepdaughter." Without looking at her, heading rapidly for the exit, he said, in the sudden silence, "Decide now, Kanchana. You belong with us or with them. Make your mind up."

She did. Chana began to shape-shift.

Josh's smile was wonderful to behold, warm and loving. From the other bed, Laurie added his encouragement. "Great stuff, lady." His thready voice seemed to revitalize Josh, and his presence in her mind gave her the strength to continue.

Chana took the moment the guards froze, watching the feathers sprouting from her skin to sweep one arm in front of her, yanking out the catheters in Josh's arm, his yelp of pain ignored by everyone but her. She concentrated on forming the arm first, making it a great, furred paw, not attempting to shrink her size. A bullet ripped through her shoulder, and she cried, or rather, roared as the rest of her body followed, her clothes tearing into shreds and falling away from her larger body.

"Chana, keep to around ten feet, or you won't fit in the room," Josh instructed, and she obeyed, shocked at how well her new skills came to her. Not trying to hide

any more, she blasted out a telepathic message to anyone who could pick it up, a picture of her route here, the main corridor, all the cameras she'd observed, and ended with a detailed vision of the room where people stood gaping at her.

"Get me out of this," Josh commanded.

She used her claws to tear and her strength to yank and freed him from the restraints

One after the other, two vampires popped in, Andreas Constant and a woman she didn't know, silver-white hair streaming down her back from a tie at her nape, dressed incongruously in a pair of shorts and a sweaty T-shirt. She must have come straight from the gym when Cristos called. After sundown. Vampire time.

Constant took the time to give the woman a once-over. "Very nice," he commented in his dark, sinful voice. "Was it cold where you came from?"

The woman glanced down at where her nipples peaked the thin material of her T-shirt, and frowned. "It's colder here. Flashing does that to them."

Constant lifted an ironic eyebrow. "Does it now?" Obviously Chana wasn't the only one who had made the connection between the vampire's word for their instant transportation and the other connotation of flashing.

Chana cut in, irritated. "*You do know we're in danger here?*"

Constant grinned. "Not any more. We're here in force, little sister." His grin faded when he saw Laurie. "Christ, he's in a bad way."

"So do something." Josh stood next to Chana, a washcloth pressed against his arm to staunch the blood from the drainage holes. "Take those tubes out of him and get us out of here. Take the bags so we know what they've given him."

He vaulted over the bed and stretched his hand out to touch his brother, so gently Chana wept for him. "You are *not* going to die, Laurie. I came to get you, and I'm not taking you out of here in a body bag."

"No, he's not." Cristos walked into the room. He opened his mouth to say more, but the siren wailing started up again. Cristos lifted a walkie-talkie to his mouth—the old-fashioned kind, the one that looked like a black brick with a silver aerial poking out the top. "Somebody get that thing knocked off!"

The siren abruptly stopped.

He glanced at Andreas, who was gazing at the walkie-talkie in disbelief, and he shrugged. "Outdated, but it works. We lost most of our stuff with the Department, but you can get these almost anywhere." His gaze swept over the room, comprehensively taking in the inhabitants. "My, my, what a crowd." He glanced at Skeffington's guards, who had trained their guns on him. "It's very flattering that you'd shoot me over a shape-shifter, but put your weapons down. It's over."

An air of command overlaid his usual suavity, one Chana wouldn't have dreamed of questioning. "We pinpointed the facility from Chana's transmission and arrived. In force. We are in control here now, so don't fight it."

"Neat," said Josh admiringly.

Cristos gave him a genuine smile, so different from George's. "Glad you're okay."

"Laurie isn't. They've pumped all kinds of things into him, starved him, cut him, hurt him. They deserve to die for that."

"Not our call." Cristos went over to Laurie's bed and laid his hand on his forehead. "We'll keep him here for a day, make sure we're not forcing his body into shock when we withdraw the Cephalox. Then we'll move him to another facility, where we can look after him better."

Laurie took a deep, shuddering breath and turned into Cristos's hand. "Keep it there. I don't know what you're doing, but I feel better than I have in days."

"There's no miracle cure, Laurie. I can only give you a small boost. Like an adrenaline shot."

But he kept his hand on Laurie's forehead while he turned his head and addressed George.

George glared at him, fury overriding any other emotion. "This is my facility. I'm merely conducting clinical trials here. I'll appeal to the government."

Cristos slipped his spare hand into a side pocket and drew out his ID. On the other side of the room, Andreas Constant did the same. "*I am* the government," Cristos said.

"So am I." Slowly, so as not to provoke Cristos's men standing at the doorway, George drew out a small leather wallet and flipped it open

CIA.

Chapter Fifteen

The scientists Cristos brought with him unhooked Josh from the machines and took samples of the stuff away for analysis. It became obvious that one of the substances was Cephalox, but the others appeared equally clear and waterlike in appearance, and George's staff wasn't telling. They left Laurie on a Cephalox drip, with some saline to help his nutrition. They couldn't risk cold turkey on a man as weak as Laurie.

A technician remained in the room, but Josh refused to leave his brother. He dressed Chana's wound when she changed back, found her something to wear, a pair of jeans she had to roll up at the bottom and an overlarge T-shirt, much like the ones someone had found for him. Her wound was clean, and the bullet had passed through the fleshy part of her shoulder. Even the short time she'd spent in the griffin form proved enough to accelerate the healing process, but she wanted to get involved in what happened next, not waste time in her griffin form. Time enough to heal properly later.

Holding Laurie's hand in his left and Chana's in his right, Josh sat by the bedside, sending all his strength to aid his brother's recovery.

When the call came from Cristos, Josh felt reluctant to leave Laurie and made the technician swear he wouldn't leave him for any reason. He met Chana's eyes with a bleak stare. "Until he's better, I'm not leaving him. I know you can't be happy at that—"

She interrupted him with a gentle finger against his lips. "I think it's the right thing to do. It makes me happy to see one family that isn't dysfunctional. There's no way I'd want to keep you away from him."

He kissed her fingers before she moved them away. "Thank you."

Still hand in hand, they made their way to the conference room Cristos had found, following the man who'd been sent to fetch them.

Cristos greeted them with a grim smile. Department 57 people filled the large room, together with George Skeffington, who stood between two men obviously detailed to take care of him, from the way they kept close and from their determined expressions.

"This is a quick operational meeting," Cristos said, once the crowd had hushed. "Status reports, a plan, and back to business. We need this facility shut down, people, but we need to know what's going on. So I've set the usual staff in the command center we found, with a special assistant on each to monitor the calls.

We'll know more later." He shot a glance at George, standing silently between his captors, a slight smile on his face.

Cristos turned his attention back to the crowd, sitting or standing, waiting for his update. The air tingled with Talent, but Chana would have walked past most of them in the street without a second glance. Well, perhaps a second glance at some of the more stacked males.

Josh tugged her hand, and she turned to him with a smile, wondering why he caught his breath. He leaned forward and kissed her softly. "Because you're gorgeous and mine," he murmured. "That's why."

Cristos cleared his throat. "Ladies and gentlemen, let's get on, shall we? Josh, I'll want you and Chana to debrief. Stay back when the others leave, please, and I'll do it myself. Di—"

Diane stepped forward before he finished the word, handing him a piece of paper. Cristos glanced at it and grunted. "No more than I expected." He looked up, scanning the people waiting, more or less patiently. "It may be that some of our own are involved. This won't be pleasant, people. I'll set up a meeting and go from there, and I want to see those of you who are full-time agents."

Chana felt the shock arcing through the room, and because of her connection to Josh, she understood why. The government agencies they worked with had made certain promises to Cristos, and now they were breaking them, maybe setting other people, other agents, against them. They shouldn't have felt entirely surprised.

"This facility is finished. The technology is being investigated, dismantled, and I'm calling in our best people to look at it. That accounts for some of you. I'm having our own medical people flown in, and we'll move those Talents in a bad way to more appropriate hospitals." He looked directly at Chana. "That includes you, Ms. Rafiz."

She clutched Josh's hand. "I'd like to stay here, if I may."

Cristos gave her his full, unnerving attention for a full half minute. It seemed much longer than that. "If the medics say there's no danger. If there is, I want you somewhere we can care for you properly."

"So do I," Josh said quietly.

"You too, Josh. How are you feeling?"

Josh shrugged. "Tired, but okay." He grinned and flexed his bandaged arm. "Especially now I'm not full of chemicals. They didn't have me long, and they wanted to keep me relatively healthy." George shot him a malevolent look but said nothing. Josh's hand tightened around Chana's.

Rapidly, Cristos assigned tasks. Just as rapidly, the room cleared as people went to deal with their assignments.

"You're trying to tell me you people are efficient?" George sneered once the room was empty of all but George, his guards, Cristos, Andreas, Josh, and Chana.

Cristos sent him a scathing glance. "I'm not trying to tell you anything. You're finished, Skeffington."

“Yeah?”

George didn't have to remind them about his financial power, the politicians he'd bought, the favors owed him. His position as a CIA man wouldn't hurt him, either. Cristos arched an eyebrow. “You're seventy. You know you're getting weaker, and you know why. Do you think you can walk into a room full of Talents and no one would notice?”

Chana turned shocked eyes on Cristos, then to Skeffington. Cristos had hit a nerve. She knew Skeffington well enough to see that. “George? What's wrong?”

George looked toward her but didn't meet her gaze. “Just a little heart trouble. It's only to be expected in a man my age. I don't need a transplant or anything like that.”

Cristos met his gaze levelly. “You and I both know it's more than that. You should rest. I don't want you dying on me.” He stared at George, the men's gazes clashing like duelers in the field. “I don't intend to interrogate you at any length. I'm letting you go.” He turned to Chana. “Take your stepfather home, Chana.”

Josh's grip tightened. “I'm going with her.”

“Of course. Right after I've debriefed you both. It shouldn't take long. I'll send a medic to you at the house. I want your progress monitored, though I think you'll both be fine. Chana, you should shape-shift when you get home. You'll heal completely.”

Skeffington growled. “Taking your bitch mother into my house was almost worth it, to get my hands on you.”

Without warning, Cristos strode to George and put the tips of his fingers to George's temples. Although Chana started, she stayed back. She couldn't change anything.

The room thrummed with power. Two forceful, powerful men like Cristos and George Skeffington didn't need psi talents to make their presence felt, and together, they could have achieved anything. Only when so close did Chana realize their similarities. Charismatic, powerful, neither of them conventionally handsome, neither acknowledging the usual limits. They knew what they wanted, had untrammelled, unobscured visions, and went for it with everything they had. Scary. She was beginning to think Josh had some of the same material, for all his easygoing manner.

He stood back, silently waiting, and she let her mind open fully, slipping into his, shocked at his sheer weariness. He smiled. “*It's worth it. I have Laurie back, and I still have you.*”

“How long for?”

“As long as you want. Your call.”

She had no time to question him, because Cristos stepped back, returned to his place at the table, and picked up his loose jacket.

“He'll be quiet for a while. I haven't harmed him.”

He walked to the door. "You're tired. I have plenty to do here, so I'll debrief you later. Reese will take you home, the conventional way. I'll clean up here after you've gone. It'll take a while."

"I won't leave Laurie," Josh said.

Cristos studied him for a moment, his face expressionless. "You're probably right. But promise me you'll go when he's out of danger. Don't forget what you've been through and get some rest."

But when they returned to Laurie's room, after a very short debriefing session, they found him strapped to a gurney, two men wheeling him out of the room. Laurie was conscious still, and he smiled weakly at them. "I'm going to San Francisco General. They say I'm strong enough to move, and I don't want to stay here a minute longer than I have to. Seems they have a unit specially for us." He reached out, and immediately Josh took his hand, smiling down at his brother.

Josh looked from Laurie to Chana. "Go," she said. "I'll be fine." She couldn't intrude on Josh's time with Laurie.

Josh smiled his thanks and turned to his brother. "I'll come with you."

"No. Go home. I'll call you if I need you. I promise. Really, I feel much better, but I need to shape-shift. Then I can heal faster. I might need you then."

Laurie waved his free hand at Chana in an echo of a courtly flourish. "He wouldn't have stood a chance if I'd seen you first. And he'd better look behind him when I'm out of here. Go with her, Josh. I promise I'll call if I need you."

"At the first twinge?"

"Before that."

Their knuckles whitened briefly when their grip tightened. Then Josh bent and kissed Laurie on the forehead. Tears sprang to Chana's eyes when she saw the love the brothers had for each other and the way they could unselfconsciously express it. She shook her head. No doubt she would cry, once the shock of the recent events hit properly.

But not now.

Chapter Sixteen

Once back at the house, the guards took George to his room and removed all communications equipment from his suite. They couldn't let George have any contact with his partners in crime, the employees who knew what he wanted to do, the scientists not in the facility when the Department had moved in. George seemed subdued, tired, but Chana knew he wasn't defeated. It would take more than a few setbacks to get the better of George Skeffington. She would have warned Cristos, but she knew he didn't need telling.

Besides, she felt more tired than she could ever remember in her life. In her room, Josh took her in his arms, and they stood together, warming and affectionate, almost too tired to move. He chuckled. "Aren't we a pair? Come on, love, off with the clothes. We both need to heal, which means, I'm very much afraid, that we have to shape-shift."

That startled her enough for her to lift her head. "Can't we just go to bed?"

He smiled and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. "Soon. But we'll heal much faster in the other form, and we'll be able to sleep. Pull the comforter off the bed and drop it on the floor."

She had just enough strength to do that and to strip, as he bade her. To her great surprise, when she saw him naked, she felt a stirring of desire, and from his reaction, so did he.

He gave another sleepy chuckle. "I'd have to be dead not to respond to you. Come here, and I'll help you shape-shift."

She tried to do it herself and needed only a small amount of help to keep her shape small, to the size of a sparrow. Josh climbed on to the comforter, and she nestled close, snuggling into his warmth. Now they were together, neither of them could keep sleep at bay any longer.

Chana slept the clock around. When she woke, Josh helped her shape-shift back. She stretched on the comforter, smiling up at him as he leaned over her. "It feels strange when I do that—shape-shift."

"It will come naturally to you after a while. It's strange at first. How do you feel?"

He smoothed his hand up to her shoulder and gently over the mark where she'd been shot.

"A little stiff, that's all. This is amazing. I can see why my stepfather wanted to find out how it's done. Wouldn't it benefit everyone?"

He smiled. "That it would. We have our own laboratories where people go in voluntarily and take part in controlled experiments. It's only the inhumane labs that we go against. Our own doctors have a head start, in any case. They understand our makeup. They don't have to relearn the anatomy."

"I'm surprised you need doctors at all."

He stroked her, down to her breast, thoughtfully cupping it. "For some things. We still have difficult childbirths, there are a few diseases that get through, and when a vampire goes into a catatonic trance, it can take a medic to get him out of it. Some surgical conditions need correcting too. Vampires may still need tonsillectomies or appendectomies sometimes."

She laughed, then caught her breath on a gasp as he pinched her nipple gently, sending sparkles of sensation through her. "What do we do now?"

"Now?" He bent and touched her nipple with the tip of his tongue before kissing it gently. "Now we rest and plan our wedding."

She sat up quickly, but a wave of dizziness forced her back down on to the soft folds. "What wedding?"

He released her breast and mounted her, nestling his erect cock between her legs but not attempting to enter her. "Will you marry me, Chana Rafiz?"

"You don't have to." Trying to take it all in, Chana thought he might feel guilty. "Really. We've had a good time, haven't we?"

"You don't love me?"

Trust him to dive right to the heart of the matter. And to present her with a question she couldn't lie about. "Yes, I do. But-but—"

"But nothing." He leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. His cock just entered her, slipping inside as though it belonged there. She wanted it to, very much. "I love you. You love me. What else is there to think about? I want you with me, I want you safe, and I want you to do whatever it is you want to do with your life. There's a great deal more of it than there was a few weeks ago."

He slid inside her pussy, gasping when she clenched her inner muscles around him, and she felt him grow. Knowing that was as much an expression of his need as the scorching look in his eyes, she melted, feeling her flesh shape itself to take him, better than anyone else. Better than she had ever imagined.

Her head went back, and she gave one long moan of pleasure.

"I take it that's a yes," he said, more breathless than a moment ago, drawing out and thrusting in with a force that made her sigh.

Sex with Josh was hot, sweaty, and wonderful, and Chana found with mild surprise that her mind had stayed open to him all through their long sleep. He was in her, body and mind, and she was in him, sharing his feelings of hard, driving need and her own soft surrender. She lay back, as she knew he wanted her to and let him pleasure her, forcing her to a quick, violent climax, shimmering through her, before she pushed up and rolled him over.

“My turn.” She knelt then sat, urging him deep inside her, watching him gasp his pleasure. He grazed her G-spot, and it was her turn to cry out in delight. He arched his back, pushing up, but letting her do what she wanted, watching her through half-closed, glittering eyes. When she leaned forward to press his hands into the comforter, imprisoning him under her, he caught her nipple between his teeth, sending shafts of heightened awareness right through her. She cried out, almost stopping in her rhythmic movements, but managed to keep it together, feeling all the bolts of passion gathering together, building again toward another climax.

She felt him in her mind, sharing her joy, giving her his, and together they climbed, she riding him hard, animal cries escaping both of them as flesh slapped flesh and the sound of their lovemaking became softer and wetter.

A shared climax came to more than two added together, her spiraling blending with his explosion, making it something entirely new.

She collapsed on top of him, releasing his hands, feeling him tremble with the force of their shared orgasm. His arms cradled her close, his breath hot and uneven in her ear. Slowly, it quieted to near normal. “Bath or bed?” he murmured and finished with a kiss.

“Both,” she said.

“Deal,” he replied, but quite some time passed before either of them managed to move to any significant extent.

After checking with Cristos, they bathed, climbed into bed and slept, curled up together like children. When Chana woke up again, it was dark outside. Josh slumbered peacefully by her side, and not until she moved closer, did she noticed something wrong.

He felt too cold. His skin chilled her, made her flinch. She sat up, suddenly awake and stared down at him.

He’d stopped breathing.

Chapter Seventeen

"What have you done to him?"

Too frightened and angry to think straight, Chana reverted to childhood practices and went straight to Skeffington, but she hadn't been stupid enough to go without sending a warning first. The guards didn't try to stop her, but one followed her inside.

He sat at his small desk, dressed in a brocade smoking jacket and pants, staring at his computer screen. "Damn thing's useless without the Internet," he muttered, as though her explosive entrance meant nothing to him. Perhaps it didn't.

"Tell me. I've called Cristos. He's on his way. What did you do?"

He looked up at her, taking his time, then leaned back in his chair, smiling in a greasy, oily way she knew well. He'd done something. She knew it—she just knew it.

"What the fuck is happening?" If he didn't tell her, she'd make him.

"Some of his drugs lasted longer than others. Drugs can stay in your system for a while, you know."

She wanted to hit him, but she held back. Skeffington beamed, his smile positively beatific. "You should know you can't win so easily."

She heard the door open behind her and knew Cristos had come in, followed by someone else. She glanced around and nodded to Andreas. He nodded back. "Josh is too cold. I thought he was dead at first, but he isn't. It's as if he's in a coma."

"He is." Cristos's clipped tone revealed his anger. "What have you done? It's only a matter of time before we find out. We're taking samples now."

"You're not the only man with secrets." Now he had retaken control, George seemed to fill out, his age once again disguised by vitality. "By the time you find out, he'll be dead."

Chana took a step back. "Then you will be too. I'll do it myself."

She didn't believe the compassion in George's eyes, but was the love false too? He'd loved her like the daughter he'd never had—she felt sure of it—but only when he had her under his control. When hurt crossed his face, a light flinch, she felt inclined to believe it because he immediately hid his reaction.

"You feel anything at all for me, George, even though I'm a monster? Then tell me what you've done."

He glanced away. Now she knew his hurt was real, and if she could hurt him, he loved her. "Yes, I love you, but not the way a father loves his daughter. I want you for my wife, Chana, not my stepdaughter. Do it and I'll give Friedland the antidote."

She shuddered. "Never in a million years." His wife? What world did he live in? How could he even imagine she'd want to do that? A ploy. Only she felt something in him, in the outer part of his mind. Caring and a shuddering sense of ownership.

"I've poisoned him." He looked up again, the momentary hurt covered by a triumphant smile. "Ever wonder what it's like on the other side, boys? I'm seventy. I'm not going to last much longer, however well I'm cared for. So sue me. I'll trade."

"What do you want?"

Chana hid her surprise. Cristos could keep his cool, but she'd known he was a match for Skeffington. One of the few.

"I want what you've got. Immortality."

Andreas spoke softly, but his voice held a lethal edge. "Nobody's immortal."

"More than I am. How old are you?"

Andreas glanced at Cristos. "None of your business."

"See?" George lifted a quavering finger and pointed at him. "I'd like to bet you're as old as me, if not older. Give me that. It's all I want. You think I funded that facility for altruism or money? Oh, the money would've been nice, but you've probably found the key documents by now."

"Yes." Cristos spoke without inflection. "To discover the secret of longevity. That's at the heart of all the programs you set up. Our people are working on it too, but we haven't discovered anything usable yet. And we don't use inhumane methods."

"Inhumane." George's thin, dry lips turned up in a sneer. "But I don't care what you turn me into. Make me young again. Give me extra life. Then, I swear, I'll work with you, not against you. I just want what you have. Life. I'm not done yet. I've only just started." He stared at Chana, not trying to hide the desire in his eyes. All her life she'd seen him as a father figure. Not as husband material.

Agony and disgust pulled at her, drew her to the stepfather she saw with new eyes. Liver spots blotched the backs of his hands. Lines crisscrossed the thin, papery skin of his face. George's very vitality, his zest for life, hid the signs of aging, but she saw them now.

From what Josh had told her, she could convert him. She could make him what she was.

Cristos knew the same moment she did, and they looked at each other, all barriers down, nothing hidden. She had never seen strength in submission, but she did now.

"Do it. We have no choice. Josh is deteriorating quickly." His head whipped around to confront George. "Do you have an antidote?"

George nodded. "Not a vial of liquid, but I will give you the formula. You can get the ingredients easily enough. It's the proportions that are important, but you can't get them from me, because I never memorized them. The formula is on a computer in this house, protected by so many passwords that by the time you get to it, it'll be too late."

Cristos studied him. Chana knew he was examining George's mind, searching it for the truth, and didn't make it gentle. That she knew from the lines of tension around Skeffington's mouth. She didn't attempt to read either of them. She knew it would hurt.

After about five minutes, Cristos breathed out in a deep sigh and looked at Chana. "He set this up as a contingency plan. One of the drugs he gave Josh was laced with this poison. We have no choice. But if you agree, after you convert Skeffington, we'll hold him until we've checked everything out." He paused, and his eyes sparked with a new concentration, something drawn out from deep inside so there seemed only the two of them in the room. In the universe. "Be sure, Chana. You can only convert one person in your lifetime, and you're going to live a long time. Don't let anything sway you."

"I already have." She didn't look away. She didn't need to. "I love Josh. I would do anything for him. I'll do it, if it means he lives." She swung around to face Skeffington. "But if you're lying to me, I'll make sure you die when he does."

"We can do that." She heard Cristos, but she didn't break off contact with Skeffington. "We can bind them."

"No, I don't want that." If he died, Skeffington wouldn't be the only one to follow Josh Friedland into death. "And I will never marry you. Ever."

Skeffington sneered. "I was a handsome man once. I will be again. At least I can compete with Friedland on a level playing field."

She shook her head. "Never," she repeated firmly.

"Do you want us to leave?"

She still gazed at Skeffington. "Yes, but not you, Cristos. I want you here." She wanted a witness, someone to see everything played out. "If he tries anything, kill him. If Josh doesn't survive, I'll go with him."

"You've bonded?"

A smile played around her lips. "I believe we have." When cold, hard reality struck her, she almost gasped with the shock of it but caught the sharp breath.

Instantly, she felt Cristos in her head, bolstering her, and she asked the question she longed to know the answer to. "*Why are you letting him get away with this? Why don't you hurt him?*"

The answer came back filled with grave sincerity. "*He isn't lying about Josh, Chana. Skeffington has given him a designer drug, and by the time we analyze it and find the antidote, Josh will be dead. At least if Skeffington is part of the community, we'll have something on him. Outside the community, he is dangerous. If you do this, he will need our support network. We can control him.*"

That made sense. Perhaps he would see things differently from the other side of the fence. If he didn't, the community could impose sanctions. Or she could kill him. *"I'm only doing this for Josh."*

"I know. If there were any other way, we'd take it."

"Once Josh is well again, you can kill him." She didn't care anymore. George wasn't worth saving.

"He'll have a contingency plan for that. But I'll work on something to restrain him."

She wouldn't put money on George against Cristos, but they didn't know George. Nobody did. He'd started with nothing and ended one of the richest people in the world. You didn't do that by behaving like an idiot.

She cut the connection, not wanting to know any more. She could think of no other way of saving the man she loved with all her heart.

She met Skeffington's gaze straight on. "If Josh dies, so do you. That's an oath, sworn before witnesses."

"You won't have to do it." Andreas's low voice confirmed her oath. "You should not do it, but I will do it for you. That is my oath."

"Witnessed." The single word from Cristos, without emotion. Sealing a pact.

George didn't believe it. Chana saw the incredulous expression in his eyes. He had a lot to learn. If he had time to learn.

Chana began to strip, deliberately keeping her mind vacant. The door clicked softly behind Andreas as he left, and Cristos gazed down at the floor. While shape-shifters were probably comfortable with each other, others had a little more difficulty, it seemed.

Down to panties and bra, Chana shivered when she caught Skeffington's hot, avid stare. She decided to sacrifice her underwear in the cause of modesty and began to shape-shift. She felt relieved when fur began to grow on her arms. Who'd have thought the sight of golden fur on her body would please her?

Her underclothes tore away and fell to the ground, but by then her shape had changed.

Cristos looked up and stepped forward. "Can you keep your shape human-sized?"

"Yes." Josh had taught her well. At the thought, sorrow filled her heart, and she felt tears in her eyes, wetly spilling over. She took a deep breath and fought them back, feeling Cristos touch her flank in a soothing gesture.

"Come over here," Cristos told George.

His eyes wider than she'd ever seen them, George slowly stood up and came around his desk to stand before her. She extended a wing, enjoying the half-repelled, half-fascinated look he gave her.

"I've not seen anything like this since—"

"Since your wife?" Cristos suggested.

"Yes. Since Chana's mother."

"What happened to her?" At least, that was what she wanted to say, but the words came out as a muted roar. Cristos patted her, and she remembered, quieting.

"The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can save Josh," Cristos reminded her. As if she needed reminding.

"Take a feather," Cristos instructed George. He plucked one from the underside of one wing, using the tip of his finger and thumb, touching her as little as possible. It stung Chana, but not much. Not as much as the ache in her heart.

He stepped back, staring at her. "I can see her, inside."

"She's not inside. This is her, as true as her other form. You could have killed her, feeding her Cephalox year after year."

"I didn't know."

Since she remained inside his head, reading him, she felt inclined to believe him. It didn't matter.

"Change back now, Chana." Cristos spoke low. "Turn around, Mr. Skeffington. Give Chana her privacy."

"Her name is Kanchana." But he turned around, facing the wall.

Cristos turned too but kept George well within view. She changed back and scrambled into her top and jeans, her underwear ruined. She picked up her bra, grimaced, and threw it into the wastepaper basket. "You can turn around now."

George's fingers were white around the feather.

"Take off your shirt, Skeffington."

He wouldn't release the feather, so he fumbled undoing the buttons. But when he'd thrown his jacket, tie, and shirt over the big leather chair, and wore only his undershirt, he took the two steps that brought him to her. She stared at him, looked properly for the first time in years. George was very fit, for a man of seventy. But he *was* seventy.

"Put the feather in the palm of your hand, George, and press it to your upper arm. Chana, you have to put your hand over his, signaling your acceptance. It will burn, but you mustn't let go, or it won't happen."

Cristos silently crossed to the door. "This is a private ceremony. I'll leave you to it. Come outside when it's done." *"I'll stay in your mind, but don't forget that once he's converted, he'll have telepathy too. He already has it in a crude version, but nothing like he'll have when he's a griffin."*

George laid his hand over his arm and nodded at her. She followed suit and tried to control her trembling. How long would this take?

Not long. She felt the warmth through their combined hands. It quickly grew into searing heat, but she held still. If this burned her, she could shape-shift and heal. Once they'd seen to Josh. Nothing mattered more than that. Nothing.

Skeffington murmured something to her, but she didn't listen, concentrating on keeping her grip steady. When he whimpered, she wondered how he was holding

on. If it burned her, it must feel hot enough to brand him. But she couldn't bring herself to care.

All her thoughts remained with Josh.

At last, after what seemed like forever, the heat receded. She lifted her hand away. When Skeffington did so, she saw no sign of the feather.

Instead, branded on his upper arm, sat a griffin tattoo, in glowing reds and golds, perfect in every detail. For a brief moment she forgot Josh in her wonder.

Memories returned in a flood. "What's the formula?"

"Bring them back in."

She sent a brief message to the people outside, and she heard the door open. Without looking, she knew Cristos and Andreas had returned.

George smiled slowly. He looked the same. "I feel it," he murmured.

"We'll take you in," Cristos said. "You'll need a mentor, and Chana will be too busy with Josh."

She sighed in relief. Yes, George wouldn't welsh on a deal, but he'd do his best to change the terms and conditions of it. And delay matters in the hopes of getting his stepdaughter back. So he could court her. Some hope.

If he loved her, he wouldn't delay now. Not if he thought she would die.

With a low growl, George gripped the undershirt and dragged it off over his head. Then he turned around.

The feather tattoo wasn't the only one he had.

Chapter Eighteen

When Josh woke up, he felt her hand enclosing his. When he opened his eyes, she was there, waiting for him.

She smiled. "Welcome back."

He smiled stiffly. "Thanks. Where have I been? I remember you agreeing to marry me, but after that, not a lot."

"You've missed a day." She squeezed his hand and glanced away. He followed her look, and saw Cristos sitting on a chair by the window, watching him.

Cristos took up the story. "Skeffington poisoned you. He and his department devised a new poison that crosses the shape-shifting barrier and used it on you. It went in with your drip and had a delayed effect. Every Talent will have to memorize the antidote formula or have a vial of it on their person until we develop a vaccine." He sighed. "For every step forward, we take two back." Weariness—Cristos's weariness—enveloped them all, but he quickly shook it off.

Josh worked to clear the last of the fuzziness from his brain. "Considering I've been poisoned, I don't feel too bad at all." He pushed against the bed and sat up, feeling Chana pile pillows up behind him. He smiled and reached for her hand, needing to touch her.

She sat on the bed, and they both looked to Cristos.

He was smiling gently. "You're a good couple. It makes some of the things I do worthwhile to see this."

Josh arched a brow. "Some?"

"Some," he said firmly. After ten minutes, while Cristos explained what he'd missed, Josh knew what he meant. The thought of George Skeffington as a Talent made Josh's blood run cold.

A brief moment of silence fell. Then he continued. "We've closed down the facility. We found six Talents there, not counting you and your brother, and we've moved them all to places of safety. We found evidence that they have experimented on, and killed, at least six others." He sighed heavily and rubbed his forehead. He looked up, his eyes bleakly fierce. "They sacrificed people, treated them like animals, all for nothing. They didn't isolate the gene, or whatever it is, that makes a Talent, and they didn't succeed in extracting any essence that would cure people or make them stronger in any way." His attention turned to Chana. "I don't know if your stepfather knew the extent of the experiments. I don't think he wanted to

know. He's desperate. Or he was. Now he's a Talent, I intend to take him in and find him a mentor."

"He could be dangerous," Josh put in.

"He could. But I don't think so, not now he has what he wants. He'll have to die soon, anyway."

"What?" Chana sounded so lost, Josh moved to hold her.

Cristos flashed a grim smile. "It's why the Department exists. He can't go on being George Skeffington, and since he made no provision to carry on, he'll have to become someone else. We'll make sure it's someone reasonably weak. He'll have to fight for his power."

"What's to stop him coming back anyway?"

Cristos shrugged. "He can come back as his own employee. If he refuses to relinquish his power, we'll block his memories." He gave her an apologetic smile. "Some don't want to give it up, the gains of a lifetime, especially the first time. We can provide help, and he can have a few more years, but that's it."

"He'll be excited." Chana's flat statement sounded as though it came from an old woman. Weary, full of ennui. "He'll *want* to start again. He's done all he wanted in this place, so starting again will be a challenge he'll enjoy." She lifted her eyes and looked at Josh. "I couldn't do anything else. I had to do what he said. Now he'll always be there." She turned her head to regard Cristos. "He'll always be a threat."

"Why?"

"Because he always wants more. And he wants me."

Cristos sighed again. "I know. He could be an asset, in time, but for now he's another headache. You won't be involved. When he moves on, you won't know where he is unless you want to." His voice softened. "Sometimes it's better to make a clean break."

"I know I was born to this," she said, sounding even more lost than before, "but it's new, all new."

Josh wanted to cradle her close, to care for her, to protect her against everything. Irrational, but the feeling didn't come from the rational part of his brain.

Because he was always connected to her, she knew. She sent him understanding and strength. And he knew he was wrong to want to shelter her, but it didn't stop him wanting to.

"We'll go away for a while," he said softly. "Somewhere warm, where you can rest."

"You too," she murmured. He saw the heat in her eyes and wished they could go now.

A voice came from somewhere outside. A loud voice. "Hey, Friedland! You there?"

For a moment Josh felt disorientated, as though this place was an illusion. That voice didn't belong here.

A brusque tap on the door announced the entrance of Ted Maxwell.

Josh gaped, but so did Ted. "Cozy," he commented, coming into the room uninvited. He nodded to Cristos, who had got to his feet, and Chana, who had not. "I need a word with my boy."

Cristos stepped forward smiling urbanely, not at all put out by Ted's brusque manner. "I think he's Chana's boy now."

"Not unless she's got a contract."

Josh's grip on her hand tightened. "She will have, very soon." When she turned to protest, he said, "You promised, so I'm keeping you to it. A verbal contract is as good as a written one between honest people. Isn't that right, Ted?"

Ted, in the act of shaking Cristos's hand, turned his head sharply. "Aye, that it is. That's the way, is it?"

"Definitely."

"It might settle you down. So tell me who she is."

Although Ted was as forceful as Skeffington, Chana didn't feel intimidated.

"*I know. I feel that way too.*" Josh sounded amused. "This is Chana Rafiz, George Skeffington's stepdaughter."

"The diabetic?"

Josh chuckled. "A mistaken diagnosis."

Ted's eyes narrowed. "The same as you are, boy?"

Josh burst into laughter. "And what would you know about that, Ted Maxwell?"

Maxwell grinned, and the smile transformed his face. *That* made the difference. This man knew how to love. He wasn't afraid of his own emotions or those of others.

Fortunately, after a cursory glance and smile for her, she didn't need to take part in the conversation. Josh told Ted he'd had a fall but hadn't damaged his knee; he was resting up to make sure, and Ted told Josh he was pleased Josh was looking after himself. "But I got calls from the places we booked you in, and I told them summat like that and decided to come over and talk to Skeffington for myself. The season's all but over, the Premiership's decided, and I've got a week or two to meself."

"Where's Mrs. Maxwell?"

"In Corfu, waitin' for me, so I don't want to make this a long visit. His secretary told me Skeffington was busy, but if 'e thinks 'e can keep me waitin' like a servant, 'e's got another thought coming."

"I'm sure he didn't mean it in that way," Cristos said. "Skeffington has had a lot on his mind recently. I work for the government, and we found some irregularities in his research laboratories. However, he's offered to put it right, and I think he'll be able to get back to business in a day or so."

Maxwell regarded Cristos silently for a moment. A man not afraid of gaps in conversation. Chana had seen Skeffington use the same tactic to let a man talk himself into trouble. When it became clear Cristos was made of sterner stuff, Maxwell shrugged and said, "Aye, well, I hope so, because I haven't got much time. All I want to know is what he plans for the team, and why he hasn't been in touch, like 'e promised." Ted Maxwell's use of the letter *h* was haphazard, to say the least. Chana liked it.

"You don't want him in charge, do you?"

Maxwell shot Cristos a sharp look. "Why do you say that?"

"He doesn't know anything about the game. It's a financial investment for him, nothing more."

"He wouldn't be the first one to treat football like that. Most of the boards of the top clubs are made up of money men." Maxwell's expressive face settled into creases of unhappiness.

"You don't like it. I can't blame you. I'm a hands-on man myself." Cristos sent a message to Josh and Chana. "*I like him.*"

"*Why does that not surprise me?*" Josh remarked, deep in her mind.

Chana giggled, and both older men glanced in her direction before Cristos turned his attention back to Ted. "I can't promise anything, but at present we have a certain leverage with Skeffington. What do you want?"

"I want the club back. I've got a syndicate, ready to step in, at the right price. I can't do it and stay manager. They won't have that. Anyway, I'm not that rich. I get to be chairman when I retire as manager with this lot. Unlike George Skeffington, they know their football and what's good for the game."

Cristos chuckled. "I'll do what I can."

That meant Ted would get his deal. In any case, Ted didn't know what they knew; George Skeffington bought Josh and Laurie, not the soccer club. He didn't really care about that.

"Aye, well, I hope it doesn't take long."

Cristos clapped Maxwell on the back. "Let's go and discuss it. I happen to know where I can find a very nice bottle of old Scotch."

"Sounds good to me." Maxwell turned to Josh. "You stay in bed the rest of the day, boy. I don't want that injury starting up again. You concentrate on your young lady. When are you planning to get hitched? Are you doing the Beckham thing?"

For some reason that made Josh smile. "I think we'll do the Vegas thing instead. We can always have a loud party when we go home."

"Home?" Chana swung around, indignant. "*This* is my home, Josh."

"Yes, sweetheart, I know. But I'm under contract to the Dons for at least three more years, and I want to continue my career. I really do."

"And what am I supposed to do?"

He drew her close as Cristos ushered Maxwell out of the room. "Whatever you want to do, darling. Whatever you want."

"What if I want to join the police department again?"

He grinned. "You won't get a big gun in England."

She slid her hand down the sheet until she found him, already hardening for her. "Oh, I wouldn't be too sure of that."

His shout of laughter heated her blood, but she didn't know if he was well enough. But when she tried to withdraw, he clasped her hand, pressing it down on to his cock. "Oh no, you don't. You started it."

"You shouldn't. You've only just recovered."

With his free hand, he drew her down and gave her a lingering kiss. "I'm sure it'll make my recovery faster. And it means you'll have to do the work."

She crooked a brow. "You don't say." She wriggled her fingers and had the satisfaction of seeing him gasp. Then she pulled back and gave him a long, hard stare. "Okay."

He whipped back the sheet as she shucked her jeans and panties, but when she went to pull her loose top over her head, he stopped her with a, "No, just come here."

She climbed over him, straddling his thighs, giving him an unimpeded view of her pussy, already wet for him. He looked, gazed, and smiled. "Beautiful. Just beautiful."

"Pajamas?"

He shrugged. "What can I say?" Pale blue, fastened with a drawstring, but as pajama bottoms went, they didn't actually offend her. Just unnecessary. So while he looked at her, watched her arousal visibly increase, as her labia swelled and her pussy dampened for him, she undid that drawstring. She needed a pair of scissors.

Eventually it loosened, and she pulled it free. He obligingly lifted his ass when she pushed the garment down. She slid her hand up, deliberately cupping that gorgeous, muscular backside, and a growl rumbled through him, starting at the bottom of his stomach. She squeezed, felt those powerful muscles flex in response and, without warning, brought her head down so she could taste him.

His flavor felt like coming home. With his groaned, "Oh, fuck!" above her, she carried on. He threaded his hands into her hair, and the twinge when he accidentally pulled one out only added to the banquet of sensations coursing through her body. She loved the way he looked at her. She did her best, thrusting her backside up while she worked him. She licked around the head thirstily. Not that it would take much lubrication for him to enter her. She felt wide open, juices dripping from her, moistening the tops of her legs.

“No more.” He sounded hoarse. When she lifted her head and looked up, the burning desire in his eyes melted her right then and there. “I want you. Here. Now.”

She couldn’t resist a tease. Slowly, she adjusted her position, pushing her body up with her hands on the mattress and then crawling over him like a predatory beast. “Neanderthal much?” she suggested.

He couldn’t smile, not while she hovered her pussy over him. She held his cock with one hand, gripped it near the base as she guided her body down to envelop him in her heat.

Keeping his gaze, she sank down on him. He filled her; she took him in and didn’t stop until she touched base. His balls nestled into the cleft between her buttock cheeks. She paused for a moment, their gazes locked, his body in hers.

He moved first. He smiled and reached for her. “I love you,” he said.

She smiled back but didn’t take his hands. He grasped her waist and lifted his legs, so she could lean against his thighs. Their gazes lowered to where her body enveloped his. Nothing between them now. “I love you.”

Then she moved with more purpose, lifted and sank down. He groaned and thrust up. His head went back against the pillows, and his hands braced on the mattress. She leaned forward and set up a rhythm, working them both up. Tingles coursed through her in waves, rippled over her skin. She could almost see the waves. But she filled her gaze with her lover, the man who in such a short time had come to mean everything to her.

“Touch yourself,” he muttered in that low voice that added chills to the tingles. “Let me see it.”

She’d never done anything like that before, but for him, she didn’t hesitate. She slipped one finger over her clit in a movement she’d perfected in years of celibacy. Now she felt glad, because she was doing it for him. He reached for her, dragged up her T-shirt, and unceremoniously pulled the cups of her bra down to reveal her breasts. The underwire in the bra thrust them forward, and now she pressed them between her arms, pushing them at him.

His eyes sparked blue fire, and his gaze roamed freely over her. She felt wanton, sexy, and utterly outrageous. And he made her feel that way. His approval, his love pulsed through her, inside and out, his mind completely open to her, hers open to him. They belonged as one. No barriers remained, and they’d never return.

He tweaked her nipples, licked his lips, and she worked him hard, pounded on his cock. She held her finger steady, so her clit rubbed against it with every stroke, and she screamed his name, no longer aware of any other being but him.

When the first hard throb pulsed inside her, she rejoiced and joined him. Her inner muscles clamped around him, drinking everything he gave her, and all the time he watched her.

Every thought in her mind completely wiped by her violent orgasm, she fell forward, into his arms. He held her safe, and together they slid into sleep.

Chapter Nineteen

Chana and Josh only just made it to dinner. They planned to eat in their room, but Ted called Josh, asking him to make an appearance. As he put the phone down, he grimaced at Chana, lying naked and sated on the bed. "He wants me to help persuade your stepfather to sell the club. I think I should."

"I thought he told you to stay in bed."

"He asked if I felt well enough to eat." A sudden grin as he remembered Ted's precise words. "He said from what he guessed we were doing, I could do with the rest getting up would give me."

She broke into laughter, and his smile broadened to see her so happy. He guessed she hadn't had many happy moments in her life. He would make sure she got many more in the future.

"He said formal, so I'd better break out the tuxedo."

"Did he say anything about my stepfather?"

"He's going to have to find another hostess." He reached out a hand and helped her up, lingering to caress her plump breast. He drew her close for a lingering kiss. "I'm going to want you all to myself for a while. I'll ask him after dinner. We'll do it properly, if you like."

"He might hold you to it."

"He'll be too busy." Unable to resist, he kissed her again, soft and slow. "So will you."

He was ready in half an hour. It took her a little longer, but they got to the drawing room in time.

When Josh announced their engagement, Junior clapped Josh on the shoulder, nearly knocking him flat. "Well, I'll be sorry to see her go, but it'll be good to have a place to stay in England. Congratulations, buddy."

Perhaps once his father went, Junior might come into his own. Josh decided he'd like to find out.

Skeffington was late for dinner, an almost unheard of thing but, taking recent events into consideration, hardly surprising. After fifteen minutes passed, Junior straightened his bow tie nervously. "I wonder where Father is."

Cristos was already heading for the door. "I'll go find out."

Josh followed quickly behind him. His concentration on Chana broken, he sensed what Cristos had already found. Something was wrong.

Although neither Josh nor Cristos knew their way around the house, they followed the source of the anguish. Searing through them, getting stronger the closer they got to their destination.

Josh knew Chana followed him, and he wished he'd asked her to stay behind, but he heard her voice in his mind and knew she'd sensed his anxiety. "*Not a chance.*"

George's study lay in the public part of the house, the office wing. A few staff remained at their posts, but none seemed alarmed, although when they saw the small, formally dressed party striding through the offices heading for George's private quarters, some got up to follow.

George's secretary had gone home, her station closed up and silent. Cristos didn't stop, but Josh paused to hold Chana. "Don't go in."

"Why not? What's going on?"

Cristos gave a strangled cry, and Josh followed him into George's office. What he saw made him close the door behind them, but not quickly enough to prevent Chana going in.

She cried out and surged forward, dropping to her knees next to the—thing on the floor. Cristos pulled out his cell phone and hit speed dial. Josh stood in horror, gazing at the half man, half griffin lying unconscious, sprawled across the expensive Chinese rug.

George lay naked, his thin, sagging skin a startling contrast to the fur on his left flank and arm. One great paw curled into the floorboards under his body, the other lay sprawled next to the leg. Josh had never seen a man midchange before, not one who'd not completed the process. He found it utterly shocking.

Snapping out of his stupor, he went forward to give Chana the comfort of his touch. He didn't know what else he could do. Cristos murmured into his phone before hanging up. "I've called the paramedics. They're coming in a chopper. There's a pad here, right?"

Chana nodded. She picked up Skeffington's hand and felt the pulse. "He's not dead."

"I know. I felt for his vital signs when I came in. Mentally," Cristos explained. "I can reach him, just, and I'm keeping in contact until the paramedics get here."

* * *

Another hospital bed back in the special wing of San Francisco General Hospital. This one was luxuriously appointed. Not that it made much difference to the man in the bed.

This man surely had a problem. Josh went in to find Chana sitting by the bed, staring at him. She'd cut herself off from everything else. At least they had managed to get him back to his human form. The half man, half beast had gone, and George Skeffington had returned. He had as many tubes inserted into him as Laurie had when Josh had first seen him. Now Laurie entered closely behind his

brother. Josh knew he felt as worried about Josh as about Chana. Ted had stayed on, ostensibly to arrange the publicity tour Manchester Dons would take later in the summer, but actually more concerned than he would ever admit about his two star players.

Today was the day the doctor would give his verdict. Today they would know what exactly had happened and what chance George had of recovering. Josh longed to take Chana away. Every day new lines of strain appeared on her face, and her eyes became bleaker. She needed a break, a long one, but she wouldn't go until she knew what happened.

She blamed herself. Josh could tell her until he turned blue that it wasn't her fault George refused to take advice, that he tried to shape-shift before he was ready.

So he'd stayed, and Laurie, now almost completely well again, had stayed with them.

He crossed the room to Chana, his attention entirely on her, as always. When he put his hand on her shoulder, she lifted her free hand and touched him, but she didn't look. She didn't need to, although sometimes he wished she would. The contact was exquisite torture. She hadn't left Skeffington's bedside for days. He longed for her, but knew she'd think him selfish if he insisted she left the suite and came home with him.

All he could do was wait.

Cristos entered the room, followed by a white-coated doctor, rectangular, black framed spectacles adding severity to his lean features. He glanced around the room and flipped open a file of papers. "We've done all the tests we can," he said, his voice dispassionate. Josh felt glad of it. Dispassion would help her to cope with the news. He tried to contact Cristos, but he was completely closed. He felt Chana's skin tremble under his hand, and he wanted to hold her, but recently she'd drawn away, saved all her energy for Skeffington. "So what happens from here?" Cristos said, his voice cool.

The doctor regarded him over the top of his eyeglasses. "Mr. Skeffington's conversion went very well, as far as we can tell. But he tried to shape-shift alone, with no one to help him, and without the compulsion forced by the full moon. You, I understand, warned him against this."

Cristos nodded.

"You were quite right. He should have waited and let the shape-shift happen in its own time. It takes a few days, up to a week for an older person's body to adjust to the conversion. The strain of shape-shifting is too much." He lowered the file and took off his spectacles, addressing Chana directly. "It was not your fault. You did everything right. He did not. You even timed it right, a week or so after the full moon, to allow his body a chance to recover before the compulsory monthly shape-shift." He lifted his eyes and glanced at the others, waiting for his verdict.

“George Skeffington had a stroke. As simple as that. He tried to shape-shift on his own, far too early, defying the advice he’d been given. He has suffered aphasia, the loss of all physical communication. He is, in effect, locked inside his own body.”

Josh tightened his grip on her shoulder. Whatever it took, he’d stay here for her. If he had to resign from the team, he’d do it gladly, to keep her safe and well.

The doctor sighed. “He is no longer a shape-shifter, or rather, he can’t do it anymore. He is an old man, unable to communicate, and he will live the remainder of his life as a mortal. You might say, like a transplant gone wrong. The conversion didn’t take.”

“He would have been a constant problem. That is no reason to feel guilty. Skeffington brought his own troubles on himself. Neither of us affected them. We are not responsible for this.” She appreciated Cristos’s reassurance.

Josh sent a note of thanks, but he knew some time would pass before he believed in the reality of Cristos’s words.

“What do you suggest we do?” Chana asked then, not looking anywhere but at George.

“Take him home, employ a good nurse, and pray. He won’t get any better.”

“I can do something for him.” Cristos stepped forward to stand on the other side of the high bed to Chana, and for the first time since Josh had entered the room, she looked up. At him. Cristos kept her gaze snared in his cool, gray one. “I can give him back the gift of telepathy. He cannot speak, he can’t write, but I can give him a way to communicate. We will provide a nurse who can read him, and so he will be able to communicate with the outside world.”

Josh looked at George and knew he didn’t imagine the pleading expression in George’s watery eyes. For the first time since that day George had collapsed, he tried to enter George’s mind. When he felt Chana there, he breathed a sigh of relief. That was the closest they had come to each other for what seemed like eternity.

George’s mind roiled with confusion and turmoil, but in rational turmoil. Anger warred with frustration, and they heard, in clear tones, thanks to Cristos enabling the connection. *“Please, do it. They say I might learn to speak again, but it will take time. I need it now. I want it now!”* Without Cristos’s intervention, he wouldn’t be able to communicate, but perhaps Cristos wanted to give him a taste of what he could have, if he made the right choice.

“Leave.” That came from Cristos, an implacable command.

They left Skeffington’s mind and waited. George’s eyes lightened, the eyelids lifted as he accepted Cristos’s gift. No one else Josh knew could do this, strengthen and increase the gift of telepathy by using his own Talent. Josh hadn’t the faintest idea how Cristos did it.

Cristos glanced away, closed his eyes and pressed his forefinger and thumb to the bridge of his nose in a gesture of weariness. “It’s done,” he said, without looking up.

Josh’s first thought was for the Department 57 boss. “Do you need anything?”

Cristos looked up, and Josh took a step back, shocked.

He'd never seen Cristos looking anything else but in control, assured. But not now. Cristos appeared bleary-eyed, weak, vulnerable. Dangerously vulnerable.

Unaccustomed fear struck him, and Josh hated George Skeffington for that. Until this moment he hadn't fully understood how much all Talents depended on Cristos and his kind, the people who ran the departments worldwide. Without Cristos, the US contingent would be badly damaged.

They couldn't allow him to do that. They had to protect him.

He should have remembered his mind remained open. At that thought, Cristos's eyes regained their steely command, and he lifted his head. He might still feel weak inside, but his self-possession allowed him to cover it better than anyone Josh had ever met.

The revelation made him wonder. How often did Cristos worry, how much strain did he suffer?

Cristos spoke to him in a low voice. "No one protects me. I do the protecting."

"Can't I even feel sorry that you have no one to protect you?" His heart ached for a man so alone.

"I've not always been alone." Cristos turned away, breaking eye contact. "I choose to be so."

He deserved more.

"I've had more. Once."

Cristos blocked. It was considered rude to shut down suddenly, so the closing grew more gradual, like a mist falling, but just as final as if he'd slammed down the shutters.

With a lingering, troubled look at him, Josh turned back to Chana.

He felt the communication between stepfather and stepdaughter before he tuned in to it. He had no compunction in listening in before announcing his presence. George was wily. Just because he'd lost his ability to talk didn't change his personality.

"It is so good to speak to you again. If you can do that, surely you can help me to change my form again?"

"No." Cristos had moved into the conversation too. *"You should have waited. When you tried to shape-shift on your own, your body rejected the change. That was your chance, and you blew it."*

Shock, as potent as an electric shock lanced through the body of George Skeffington. He was just beginning to realize how final this state would be for him. *"That's not possible. I can't have reverted. I felt the change. I feel it still."*

"It's as if you lost a limb. You will feel it for a little while before it goes. You are as you are, George Skeffington. You're lucky to be alive."

George's pale face contorted. *"Am I? Is this it, then, forever?"*

"You mean are you going to die?" Cristos shook his head. "Not immediately. I'll send you an assistant, someone who can interpret for you."

"I don't need an assistant. I have Chana."

Immediately Josh put a hand on Chana's shoulder, to anchor himself as much as her. The old bastard assumed too much.

Chana remained silent, but George seemed to take her consent for granted. *"I'll make it worth your while, Chana. You know that."*

"You can't." A slight shock reverberated around the room when she spoke aloud. "You can't make it worth my while, George." She got to her feet. "I'm sorry for what happened to you, but it was your own fault. I gave you what I had, and you never thanked me, never praised me. But more than anything else, you killed my mother." He began to protest, but she cut him off. "You cut off all memories of her in my mind. Crude hypnotic techniques and drugs, they said. How could you do that? Oh don't bother, I know. Everything you want, you get. Except this, George. Except this. Josh has asked me to marry him, and if the offer is still open, I accept. Even if he didn't want me, I'd leave. I stayed because while the world feared you, admired you, hated you, I owed you loyalty for what you did for me after my mother died. Or so I thought. Me and Junior were the only ones who felt anything for you. The others merely tolerate you. Now you only have Junior. Make the most of him, George."

Chana turned to face Josh, and he saw none of the bleakness he'd expected, just a terrible sadness. "Is your offer still open?"

"Always."

She leaned forward and kissed him softly on the lips. "I accept."

Without looking back, she moved toward the door. Cristos walked to the door and opened it for her. "He'll be well cared for," he murmured. "And he has his son. Good luck, both of you."

Josh shook his hand. "Thank you for everything." He glanced at Laurie, silently staring at Skeffington, an unfathomable look on his face and hate in his heart. "What will you do?"

"I'm staying for a while, with Ted. Help him prepare for the tour, have the look around I wanted to when I first arrived."

Josh grinned. "Lay off the women for a while, will you, bro?"

Laurie chuckled. "You can put money on that."

Epilogue

"Darling, are you anywhere near ready?"

When Josh opened the door to Chana's bedroom, calls and alarmed shrieks greeted him. He ignored them and strolled in.

"You can't see the bride before the ceremony," one of her attendants protested.

"Too late." Ignoring the fluttering and occasional pull on his arm, Josh walked over to where Chana stood, resplendent in the most flamboyant wedding dress they could find.

Tiers of amber tulle, topped with creamy white, embroidered with little gold flowers formed the skirt, and a tight corset top pushed her breasts right up. She glared at him. "What made me choose this thing?"

He grinned. At least he'd have a good view during the ceremony. "You didn't want to pass unnoticed, remember?" He watched one of the four women bustling around the room lift a tiara and carefully settle it on Chana's elaborate hairstyle. The confection glittered with crystals and topazes. "Very tasteful." The two color veil that trailed behind the tiara took some arranging.

Chana giggled. "You look amazing."

His smile broadened. "Don't I?" From his Manchester Dons cufflinks to his tartan waistcoat, he knew how he appeared. Elaborately overdressed. His suit was a deep caramel color, to complement Chana's gown, and the tartan clashed beautifully with it.

"How long do we have to stay in these things?" she demanded.

The women stood back, and one accidentally brushed against Josh, and then started back, as though he'd burned her.

"Until *Gossip* magazine has taken all the pictures it wants. Then we don't have to see them again. I thought we'd donate the clothes to a charity auction. We'll marry, eat a few courses—"

"You think I can eat in *this*?" She beat her hands against her dress, to anguished cries of "You'll ruin your manicure!" and "Oh no, now I'll have to arrange it all over again."

"I'll feed you later," he said, his voice lowering intimately. Despite the women trying to fuss over her, despite the astounding gown, which prevented him getting too close, the atmosphere tingled between them. He wondered how long it would take to get her out of the dress.

"Too fucking long."

His crack of laughter shocked the lavender-clad matron to her left, and she shot them a frowning look. "You should not be here."

"It doesn't matter."

It didn't matter in the least. Only he and Chana—and Laurie and Ted Maxwell, both of whom waited downstairs—knew the truth. He and Chana had had their Vegas wedding, as soon as they had recovered enough to travel. They'd been married a month.

Their bonding continued, and he could never regret their meeting, although he would have changed the circumstances. He felt overwhelmingly glad he'd been there to help her through the inevitable grief. Her bravery astounded him, both in the way she'd spoken to Skeffington and taken on her new life, and every day he grew to love her more.

He'd promised himself he would make her laugh every day, and so far he'd done that. It was fun, finding new ways to see that glorious smile break, to coax her to joy. Today he found another way to make her laugh.

Laurie and Josh delighted in giving the press what it wanted. Flashy sports cars, elaborate, vulgar decor, and extravagant clothes were the order of the day. It had taken him a full week to persuade Chana to consent to this over-the-top wedding ceremony, but eventually she'd entered it with enthusiasm. Now a huge wedding cake awaited them downstairs, with a vicar, a multitude of guests, and a feast fit for a king. Actually, his agent had persuaded some minor members of the royal family to attend. Josh wondered if they enjoyed the unabashed display of taste going right out the window.

And now Chana was done up like a fairy princess, enjoying her complaints. Planning this had helped to dispel the shadows in her eyes, at least for now.

Looking at her almost made him forget what he'd come to tell her. "Ted's happy."

"Junior did it? Oh, I'm so glad."

Acting as legal representative for his father, Junior had promised to sign the contract giving Ted's syndicate control of the club. Much to everyone's surprise, Junior retained a small interest, declaring that after he'd seen a few matches, he thought he'd like to learn more about this sport. It would never replace his beloved American football, but it was an interesting addition. So Ted had his club back and was already making plans for the next season.

George Senior didn't attend this wedding. He'd refused to communicate with his stepdaughter, but Junior told her not to worry; he'd come around in time. Josh tried to care about that, but all he cared about was Chana. It made him happy when the rest of her family had defied George Senior and come to the wedding. They waited downstairs with the other guests, waiting for Chana's grand appearance.

Right now she had a questioning look in her eyes. "So are you telling me where we're going after this?"

"In that long white limo?"

The monstrosity waited outside, the biggest limousine he could locate. "So you've seen it?"

"How on earth did you expect I'd miss it?"

Laughter bubbled up in both of them. "I thought you'd like it," he said, taking out his handkerchief to wipe his eyes.

She stared at him, transfixed. "You're not wearing *makeup* are you?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Brown smears on white cloth."

He looked down ruefully. "I did try it. Then I thought it was going too far."

"Is that possible?"

He shrugged. "It stung my eyes. Worth a try, though."

Ignoring the protests of the two women trying to arrange the folds of her gown, she walked forward, crushing herself against him. "You see? It is possible," she said huskily.

He ran his hands up her arms, unable to resist touching her, but before he could kiss her, a small body inserted itself between them. "You will *not* kiss her." The woman put both hands against his chest and pushed. "You'll ruin her makeup. Go away!"

Laughing, he stepped back. "Later."

Later was far too long.

In between came the wedding. The glitz, the guests, the clothes, the extravagant floral arrangements that made Chana sneeze—she forgot it all when she stood with Josh and made her promises to him. Although they were already married, this ceremony, performed by a man of the cloth, with its sacred oaths, sealed the contract for her.

She loved Josh, and she knew she'd always love him. She couldn't have found a better way of saying it than in the words of the marriage ceremony. "In sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer."

He'd given her so much, the least she could do was give him everything she had.

When he made his promises to her, she saw the same sincerity in his eyes that she felt in her heart.

After the ceremony, she wanted nothing more than to find a quiet space and show him with her body what she'd just sworn in front of a thousand people.

She had to wait. After posing for innumerable press photographs, and the *Gossip* special feature, they had to sit through the banquet. On a pair of elaborately gilded, brocade-upholstered chairs. The one dozen bridesmaids, dressed in

contrasting shades of yellow and gold, sat either side of them, presenting yet another photo opportunity.

Interminable. If not for their private conversation, conducted entirely without words, she might have fallen asleep.

Josh kept her awake.

"How many buttons are there at the back of that gown?"

She thought. There were hooks and eyes, but she couldn't remember how many. *"About twenty, I think."*

She didn't need to look at him to see his wicked smile, but she did anyway and also saw the warmth lighting his eyes. *"I plan to undo them one by one, and kiss you for each one. I'll slide that gown off you, slowly, and for every inch of skin I see, you get a kiss."* She shivered, as though she could already feel them. *"When I have you naked, I want you lying down, presenting yourself to me, just for me, for my enjoyment. I want your legs wide open, so I can see everything. Do you know how hard that will make me?"*

Deliberately he sent her an image of his cock, rigid and straining for her. She moaned, low in her throat.

"Feeling tired, darling?"

She cleared her throat. "No, not at all."

He took her hand in his and smoothed his fingers over the diamond ring he'd put on her finger earlier that day. Unlike the other things she wore, this was exquisite and in perfect taste. His touch sent electric thrills right to her center. He continued to speak to her, mind to mind. *"I'm going to taste you, so deeply you'll never forget it, never be free of me. I'll be in you with my tongue, with my mind, holding you down so you have to take everything I can give you, and I won't let up until you've come at least three times."*

She suppressed another moan with difficulty.

"I'll touch you, every inch, slide my cock up your body, and let you taste me, but not for long, because I want you at the peak. I'll slip back down, just out of reach, and only then will I come back and ram inside you. The first time is likely to be fast, but it'll be hard and deep. Then I'll stay inside you until I'm ready again. I'll hold you safe in my wings until you can't remember what it's like not to have me in you, and then I'll tell you how much I love you."

He kept every word of his promise.

 THE END 

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Lynne Connolly

Lynne Connolly lives in England with her family and her mews, a cat called Jack. She spends her time writing and filling her collection of doll's houses. After acceptance by her first e-publisher she hasn't looked back. She has over 30 books out, and plans for more. She writes in the paranormal romance, contemporary romance and historical romance genres and she likes to add a lot of steam!

Go to <http://lynneconnolly.com> to read up on the latest news about Lynne.