

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



PANTHER  
MOON  
Regina Carlyse

## **Panther Moon**

*Regina Carlsysle*

*Savage Sanctuary, Book Two*

Running for her life, Chantrea Morgan, unmated and approaching her time of change, stumbles through the night only to be rescued by a gorgeous yet dangerous male. Blinded by instant recognition of her mate, she clings to him, her only means of salvation. Her body burns for him. Her heart aches with the need to be claimed by this wild Texas panther.

Hudson Cates, warrior of the Turquoise Moon tribe of shifters, saves his grieving mate and brings her home to claim her in the only way he can...with orgasmic pleasure, savage possession and a raw sensuality that is bred into their species. In a ritual as old as time, only he, aided by another male from their tribe, can help Trea embrace her panther beast.

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Panther Moon

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# *PANTHER MOON*

**Regina Carlisle**

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## **Chapter One**

Chantrea carried an armload of supper dishes to the sink, the muted sounds of the television playing in the living room, making her smile. Sounded like a baseball game to her. Being an addict to the game was her dad's one true vice. Her mother, Celia, laughed at something Brant said. Typical evening in the Morgan household. Outside the modest Texas home, crickets chirped as the wind rustled the leaves of ancient oaks and cottonwoods. An owl hooted from a faraway branch. "Hey, Mom, dinner was great," she called as she loaded the dishwasher, turned it on and headed into the living room.

Celia smiled from her position curled up against her husband of several centuries. "Love it when a new recipe turns out."

Brant kissed the top of his wife's blonde head and winked at Trea as she wandered into the room. "You did good, hon."

As an unmated female panther, she had grown up knowing she wanted what her parents had. Love. Affection. The deepest kind of understanding between mates. It was so heartwarming to witness their love firsthand. She was constantly in awe.

Wandering to the wide mantel over the fireplace, she shoved her hands in the pockets of her worn jersey shorts and looked at the pictures lovingly displayed there. "I miss Maxwell." Her sigh was soft but even over the sounds of the game she knew her folks heard it.

"Your brother had to leave, honey. It was his time," her mother said with calm conviction. Trea turned at the slight hitch evident in her mother's voice and knew Mom missed him too. "He likes his job in Houston though he still hasn't found any females of our species. There are just so few of us left but maybe, just maybe he'll be one of the lucky males to find the perfect mate. You would think it easy in a city of over five

million people. I know it hurts that he had to go but it's natural, honey. He's a man and gods know there is no future out here in the boonies. We've lived like hermits for so long." Celia lifted a brow and glanced at Brant. "It hasn't been fair to either of our children."

Trea picked up the framed photo of her brother and herself taken during one of their rare family vacations. Tracing the handsome, male face, she blinked back moisture from her eyes as a blast of love caught her off guard. Like her, Max was blond and green-eyed but there the similarities stopped. Where she was slender, small, and to her way of thinking, rather ordinary, her brother Maxwell was a bonafide heartstopper. The gorgeous rascal was built like a tree trunk, broad-shouldered and handsome as sin. He was the kind of guy who'd made the local girls melt but he had carefully avoided all but the most necessary entanglements with humans. Smart dude. Trea was so proud of him and couldn't help but wish him well in finding a mate of his own. The lady would be a very lucky feline. No doubt about it.

Behind her, Trea heard her parents shift position and she turned, surprised, when her dad pushed a button on the remote to turn off the television. Silence, sharp and somewhat ominous, fell into the depths of the small cabin. "We need to talk, princess."

Frowning, she replaced the photo and gingerly sat on the edge of an overstuffed chair to look at her parents. Something about her father's tone sent worry to dance over her spine. "What's up, Dad?"

Brant Morgan focused his gaze on her. "Your mother and I have been talking." He cleared his throat, obviously uncomfortable. "Chantrea, you are nearing your time. Maybe this is a good moment to—"

Trea's face burned. "Dad!"

Celia patted Brant's arm. "Love of mine, you are so clueless. Let me."

He shook his head and sighed heavily, seeming downright relieved to let someone else tackle the delicate subject of a female were panther having her first *heat*. "Good. Go for it."

Celia wasn't deterred, focusing an intelligent gaze on her. "For all these years, we've tried to keep you safe out here in the country. You know panthers are solitary creatures and it's uncomfortable for us to live among crowds. It's stifling. Invasive. It was a huge risk for us to even let you attend the public school in town but, honey, we have worried so much about you. You've been so isolated out here in the woods of east Texas. No friends. Nothing that normal human girls come to enjoy. You don't have a real life out here."

"But I'm not human, Mom. It's okay." Chantrea knew darn good and well her life wasn't normal. Sometimes it made her sad but this wasn't the fault of her parents. They had to protect her. It was their duty and she would never fault them for the lonely state of her life. She shook her head and smiled, not wanting them to stress about the choices they'd made. "Really. Don't worry about me."

"We have to, Trea," her dad said, leaning forward to prop his forearms over his sturdy thighs. "It wasn't possible for you to date the local boys, honey. You know we don't mix but you are a woman now. Things are, um—"

Once again, Celia put her hand out to stop him. "Happening to your body."

Trea swallowed hard, knowing the utter truth of Mom's words. Already she felt flashes of heat zip through her with astounding effect. Soon she would be helpless to the oncoming change and facing the shift from woman to panther would be the most horrible thing imaginable when dealing with it alone. She knew she couldn't do it. The time to mate was upon her. Discomfort climbed over her flesh and buried itself deep in her belly. "Do we have to talk about this now?"

"We've decided to move to Sanctuary," her dad baldly stated. "It's time."

Sanctuary, an area in south central Texas, had been set aside years ago by their king, Titus Declan, who believed the survival of the were panther depended on them building a community. It was brilliant. Truly, brilliant. Bring them all together in the same place, ensuring males and females could find mates, band together for protection from human predators, and have some kind of normalcy in their lives. Still, her father



had balked at the idea of giving up the solitude every panther craves. So they'd remained in their little wilderness home, shielded from the world. "I can't believe this, Dad. You would give up your home just to take care of me? I'm a grown woman. I can take care of myself. I'll go. Alone. You and Mom stay here."

Brant surged to his feet. "Damn it, we're a family. It doesn't matter how old you are, we love you. We need to be part of your life, Trea. When your brother finally left, it almost—"

"Broke our hearts," her mother finished. Odd how they always finished each other's sentences. "He had to go. A man doesn't continue to live with his folks but honey, you're our girl. We should be near. There will come a time when you'll find a mate of your own, you'll have offspring." Tears filled green eyes. "I just don't want to lose you completely."

Dad put his arm around his wife's shoulders. "We're selling the place. It has been decided. Honey, you must find a mate and if we don't head out to find others of our kind, you will be in very serious trouble. It's settled."

An hour later, Trea sat curled up with a book watching covertly as her mom and dad walked hand in hand through the front door. Laughing, her mom looked back over her shoulder. "We're going for a romp, sweetie. See you in a bit."

She knew it might be longer than a *bit*. They loved nothing more than to strip down at the edge of the woods and shift into their beasts. Once they'd gone, she closed her eyes, leaning her head back against the cushiony fabric of the couch. So many changes ahead. A new place, new people. How would it feel to actually socialize with others of her species? An odd excitement filled her, along with a healthy dose of nerves. And maybe, just maybe, she would find her mate and her years of loneliness would end.

Trea closed her eyes and drifted off to the sounds of nature at play outside the walls of her home.

A loud shotgun blast ripped through the night, quickly followed by another. Celia Morgan screamed. She'd know the sound of her mother's voice anywhere. Jerking

awake, she came to her feet as a feral hiss blasted from her throat. Trea didn't have time to question a sound she'd never made in her adult life as she raced to the cabin door and flung it open. Her parents lay at the end of the clearing, their naked bodies flashing quickly from human to panther until finally all movement stopped and they reclaimed their feline form in death.

Trea's scream of pain and rage froze in her throat and her gums tingled violently. Somebody would die tonight. Somebody would pay. Gods! Barefoot, she ran to the edge of the porch when the hunters came into view.

"Fuck me blind, Tom. Did you see that?"

"Hell yeah. It's the Morgans. I went to school with their daughter." Tom Hawkins stepped closer, still pointing his rifle at Brant Morgan's panther body. He whistled low and shook his head. "I'll be damned. Can you believe this shit?"

Trea went still. She didn't recognize the first man who spoke but she certainly knew the other. He was a local hoodlum. A big, dumb redneck. Nobody ever died from being a redneck hick and a bully but he'd crossed the line tonight. Another low hiss burst from Trea's lips. Fighting back waves of grief, holding them for another time, a better moment, she crouched low wishing with everything in her that she was mated and fully panther. Over the past weeks her senses had been keener, her mind sharper. Trea sniffed the air and scented whiskey along with the smell of her parents' blood. Though her heart ached, her rage, in that instant of raw pain, was stronger.

Finally the other man spoke again. "Then that means —"

Tom's head snapped up as he spotted her on the porch. "Get her, Walt. She's one o' them. I want that snooty bitch's head hangin' on my wall." He pointed his weapon and fired. Wood from the door frame splintered and flew in every direction. Trea knew she was no match for a gun and she was certainly not capable of fighting off two drunken men. If she were fully panther, her options would be much different.

The time for thinking over, Trea let her well defined sense of self-preservation kick in and she turned in a whirl of movement and headed through the house grabbing the

keys to her parents' truck on the way out the back door. Her bare feet pounding against the warm grass, she made it to the truck and started it up.

Another shot rang out to shatter the back windshield of the old pickup. No time. No time. Gotta go. Staying here meant death at the hands of her parents' killers. She wasn't ready to die. Not yet. Not by a long shot. Trea hit the gas and kicking up a cloud of dust behind her, made her escape.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the dead of night the vision came rolling through her dreams, whipping any semblance of calm into a frenzy of motion. Mahara Declan, caught in those quiet moments between sleep and wakefulness, shifted in her bed and opened her mind. From the mists, a woman's voice cried out to her. The panic was unmistakable. The fear. The terror. Mahara suffered it along with her because in her heart she knew they were kin. They were both panthers, both women. The prophetic dream unfurled in her mind and she knew this unknown woman belonged to them. She was destined to be part of the Turquoise Moon panther tribe and Mahara knew in that instant of revelation that others would follow her, thus ensuring the continuation of their species.

Bolting upright in the bed, immediately realizing her husband Titus no longer slept beside her, she stumbled to her feet and wiped the remnants of tears from her cheeks. She threw a lightweight robe over her bare body and padded toward the door on the other side of their massive bedroom. A meager light shone from beneath it and she knew that when Titus couldn't sleep he often retreated into his cozy, private office to think about his troubles.

Mahara opened the door, her heart expanding at the sight of her mate hunched over his desk, the glow of the computer screen casting white light over the well-defined lines of his face. His long, black hair was mussed as if he'd spent the past hours raking his fingers through it. Though the prophetic dream still held her deep in its grip, she softened as sexual need raced wicked fingers over her body, her thighs. The intangible need curled deep in her pussy setting up a throb in flesh that was tender, on fire. Her

nipples pearly beneath the satin of her robe. Even after the years they'd been together, she couldn't look at him without being overcome.

He glanced up, a vacant expression in his golden eyes, and then sudden recognition seeped into them. "Darling, did I wake you?"

Mahara shook her head and went to him. As if anticipating her actions, her giant panther rolled back in his chair and stretched out so she could settle herself on his lap. He was naked, dark, ripped, completely yummy, and all hers. "No, I dreamed," she whispered as she sank against his warm, muscular body. "It woke me." Unable to resist his scent, she buried her nose in his hair and inhaled.

Titus' arms went around her. "Tell me."

"A woman stepped out of the mist. She was one of us. Two men approached her from opposite sides. They touched her and kissed her. One male was dominant over her."

"A mate and his second? Did you know the female?"

In their culture, mates recognized each other by their scent and it usually occurred very near the time of the female's shift into her panther identity. It was a dangerous proposition for the women of their species and many had been lost over the centuries leaving their race vulnerable to extinction. The shift from human to panther was difficult and sometimes deadly. No one knew the why of it but it was commonly accepted. Over the years, it had been discovered that the addition of a second male into the transition phase eased things along. A second was something like a human *best man* at a traditional human wedding yet this guy would join the couple in their bed while the female adjusted to her feline form. Weeks later, he would leave them and wait for the day when he would find his own mate.

Mahara looked up at her husband and shook her head. "She was a stranger yet one of us. Men were after her, Titus. Hunters. My dream spoke of death and blood and discovery. It is just the beginning of what we will face."

“We have worked to hide our true identities for centuries while mixing with humans. Bringing our people here to our land is the best course of protecting ourselves and our way of life,” Titus said. “What do you know of the hunters?”

She shook her head. “Not much. Just that they are coming.”

“Where is the woman?”

“She’ll be coming to us soon. I don’t know from where exactly but I could feel her running frantically toward Sanctuary.”

Titus sighed and let his head drop back to settle on the padded leather of his chair. He slipped his hand into the loose front of her robe to toy with her nipple. Pleasure slid with lazy intent through her body to settle low in her belly. Beneath her ass, Titus’ cock hardened. “It has been my dream for all these many years to bring my people together in one place, to see us thrive again. Damn it, there are far too few of us.”

Mahara settled her lips on his forehead. “I know, honey. If we could gather the women here, the men will follow. There is plenty of room to build in the area. South Central Texas is full of wide-open spaces and we already own a huge amount of land surrounding the compound. Separate houses for our mated panthers with lots of privacy would be the perfect answer to the solitary nature of our beasts. Yet we would be together for protection from humans who might prey on us.”

Titus looked at her, his gold-colored eyes burning and intense. The force of his love rolled from him to her and settled like a tender ache in her heart. “You are amazing.”

“I’m glad you’ve finally realized it.”

Grinning wickedly, he smacked her ass. “Cocky, aren’t you?”

“Mm. Suspect you’ll find a way to try to bring me down a notch or two.”

Titus laughed and stood, holding her in his arms. “Never. Hell, I like a sassy woman!”

“Glad to hear it.”

His arms bunched around her as he carried her from the office and into the dark bedroom. Together they landed in a heap among the rumpled bed sheets. Titus' hands went immediately to the tie at her waist and within seconds she was as naked as he. Titus latched on to a nipple and sucked hard as his other hand zeroed in on the petals of her wet pussy. His fingers teased her body, dipping deep into her vagina and she answered this toying quest with quick, tightening against them. The remnants of her dream lingered on the edges of her mind and, as always, her husband was completely in tune with her emotions.

"Don't play with me, Titus. Take me hard and fast. I'm dying for you."

Titus lifted his head from her breast and kissed her, sending his tongue into his mouth with a savage hunger that she happily returned. He tasted her fully, nipping her tongue and Mahara felt her gums tingle as her fangs threatened to elongate in her mouth. Thrilling tingles set up between her legs as Titus' hands played with her aching flesh. Suddenly he lightly pinched her clit and her back arched from the bed. Her belly pressed his and she writhed against him as he continued his tender torment.

He broke the wild kiss and pressed his mouth to her throat.

*Ah! Fangs!*

She sucked in a breath as they scraped along her skin, teased between her breasts, and nipped at her belly. Since her hour of turning, she'd learned to appreciate the power of a well-placed bite. Cream drenched her pussy, coating both her inner thighs and Titus' busy fingers. He emitted a low, coughing sound that was common to their species.

"Titus!"

Quickly he thrust his fingers into her pussy. In, out, he plunged them deep and hard. Mahara cried out at the intensity of the pleasure and her body quivered for more. Managing a glance at him as he crouched low over her, she noted the intense focus in his gaze, the flash of his feral incisors, gleaming white in the darkness and for a split second she tensed. Titus made a low, animalistic sound and struck, sinking his teeth

into the notch between her inner thigh and her mons. She screamed as pleasure spiked, sharp and wild. His raspy tongue raked across needy flesh and she spiraled higher. Her hands reached down to clasp his head, holding him against her as she lost control in that blinding moment of heat and savage completion.

Then he was inside her, thrusting, pumping. His cock was a searing hot brand, blazing a path through pulsing tissue and melting heat. An orgasm punched through her again. Her nails raked his shoulders and the immediate scent of his blood caused a growl to curl in her chest as her feline beast struggled to break free and run wild. Fangs elongated in her mouth. She licked at his skin and used her incisors on his mounded chest.

“Yes!” Titus gritted his teeth as the unearthly sound of his panther’s call filled the spaces around their writhing bodies. “Gods!”

As she sank her teeth deep, he roared his release. Once they lay replete together and she was snuggled against him, the memory of her vision began to consume her again. She knew he felt her internal struggle because he tightened his hold and buried his lips in her hair. “When is she coming? Do you know?”

“Soon, honey. I think she’s on her way now and we must be prepared to guide our people in the way they must move forward in this world.” She stroked her hand over the fading scratches on his shoulders and pressed her mouth to his chest. “We will survive, my king.”

“That’s good to know, my queen.”

## **Chapter Two**

Sanctuary was near. She could feel it in her bones and smell it in the air. Chantrea had been on the run for what seemed days. Was it just a little over four hours ago that she'd sat back comfortably in the small house she shared with her parents and closed her eyes, wishing for all she was worth that she could join them in the hunt? Gripping the steering wheel of the beaten old wreck of a truck that her dad had used to haul things, she felt the burn of tears behind her eyes. Relentlessly, they slid across the surface and she stubbornly blinked them away. Damn it! She didn't have time to cry now. She'd cry later when she was safe from the hunters who searched for her.

Even now she could feel them practically breathing down her neck!

Guilt consumed her as grief crawled with insidious slowness into her throat, threatening to choke her. If only she'd been able to shift. If only she'd come into her time of change earlier, she might have been there and stopped it all. What? Stop a bullet? Even a were panther was helpless against a shot to the heart or head. She could've done nothing but get herself killed too.

All she really knew at this point was that she was alone.

Drunken hunters looking for a quick thrill had stalked and killed the most important people in her life. Now she had no home to call her own. Trea had been unable even to bury her dead. Tears poured down her face and ruthlessly, she scrubbed her palm over her cheeks. The only option left to her was run to Sanctuary and hope their king, Titus Declan would take her in, have mercy on her.

So here she was driving through central Texas on bald tires and a gas tank full of fumes. At one point, she'd managed to find a sleepy, little convenience store where she'd pumped half a tank of gas using a twenty she'd found in the glove box. Barefoot, no purse, no money. Pitiful! But in the dead of night with rifles firing in her direction,



she'd had no time to plan *jack*. She'd snatched the keys hanging by the kitchen door and made it to the truck, escaping just as the men rounded the back of the house. Kicking up gravel as she'd peeled out of the driveway, she'd gotten the hell out of there before they had a chance to reload and go after her again.

Though hours had passed, she was still terrified. Behind her, some distance away, she saw a pair of headlights and inwardly she flinched. That's the way it had been all night. Unmated as she was, she hadn't gone through the shift but her senses had always been keen. Yes, they were coming and they wouldn't stop until they'd ended her life.

It was a hideous game to them now and she knew damn good and well that Tom Hawkins had always hated her. From the moment he'd pursued her in high school and she'd politely declined, he'd watched her with hate-filled eyes. Now he was out for blood. He knew what she was and wouldn't stop until he'd taken her down.

Though she was part cat, Trea was pretty sure she didn't have nine lives. Nerves tore through her, shredding what little composure she had left. It was probably nothing, but her intuition told her the enemy was gaining ground on her and she had no time to spare.

Up ahead and to her right, she saw heavy limestone markers rising into the night sky on either side of a paved road. She knew this was the place because years ago her parents had made her memorize a map to Sanctuary and the home of Titus Declan, King of the Turquoise Moon panther tribe. The words Turquoise Moon Ranch, worked in elegant ironwork scroll stretched across the road from pillar to pillar. This was no ranch. No cattle roamed here but from stories she'd heard, their king fostered the image of an eccentric billionaire. A ranch with no cattle? Apparently the nearest neighbors shrugged it off. Instead of raising beeves, her king collected were panthers, his people, for protection in an often cruel world.

A wild, frantic glance at the gas gauge of the old truck sent fear dancing wicked fingers over her body. Breath froze in her throat as her heartbeat picked up its pace. She was almost there when *almost there* just wasn't good enough. If the hunters were behind

her, she would lead them straight to the haven of her people and she'd inadvertently expose them all. Trea pressed on the gas, frantic in her need to reach her destination when suddenly the truck sputtered and coughed.

Shit!

Maneuvering it to the side of the road, she banged her fists on the steering wheel in abject frustration then spared a glance behind her. The lights were now obscured by a bend in the road. Fighting off weariness she welcomed the surge of adrenaline that raced through her system as she pushed open the truck door and stepped out. The pavement was hot beneath her bare feet as she started to run. Dense woods surrounded her and unerringly, she headed into them and away from the Turquoise Moon compound. Twigs and brush scraped her calves but she fisted her hands and barreled forward. They might find her abandoned truck but they wouldn't find her, not if she could help it.

Many times as a child, she'd run joyfully over the land surrounding the house she'd shared with her parents. Back then, she'd known that one day her panther would surpass her human boundaries and break free to live and hunt the area. She knew every rock and tree but this was different. There was nothing more confusing at the moment than this unfamiliar land. Cursing her lack of knowledge, she stumbled on an exposed tree root and slammed to the ground.

The air burst from her lungs as she lay, belly down on the rough ground. In the distance she heard the roar of a heavy-duty truck. They were almost upon her. It wouldn't take them long to spot her abandoned vehicle.

She heard the sound of truck doors slamming. Dogs bayed in the distance, their whines mingling with heavy, male voices. Dogs? Why hadn't she noticed them before? The trauma of everything that had happened tonight had certainly clouded her perceptions of things.

Tears of frustration burned her eyes and just as she managed to plant her elbows on the ground and lift her upper body, a pair of rough hands grabbed her shoulders and flipped her to her back.

Pale eyes, set in a face half man, half panther, stared down at her. Lethal fangs flashed white and a coughing sound burst from his lungs as he bent over her, poised to strike. Obviously he'd been hunting and now he was caught somewhere between a shift, giving him a monstrously feral appearance. The scent of him whipped through her head and instantly heated her blood. She stilled. He was naked. Long, dark brown hair brushed his sturdy shoulders and his nostrils flared as he caught her scent. His eyes widened.

"Where the fuck did you come from?" he growled low. "And why do you smell so *delicious?*"

The air returned to her lungs in a rush as terror took hold. She opened her mouth to scream but it quickly died when a shot rang out. Chantrea jerked at the crack of sound but before she could utter a sound, panther man swept her up. Following instinct, she wrapped her arms around his sturdy neck and held on. "I can walk," she managed.

"Fuck that. Hang on, darlin'. We're getting the hell out of here."

Scenery passed in a blur of light and shadow as he raced through the woods, the preternatural strength and speed of their kind propelling them forward. This massive man-beast was like her and offered a bit of comfort. It only made sense since they were so close to the Turquoise Moon enclave. The fact he was completely nude was another little hint.

Oh yeah, and the half man, half cat face thing he had going on.

"I shouldn't trust you. You're a stranger."

He huffed a breath sparing her a single glance from eyes that appeared so pale blue they were almost colorless. "And I suppose you're bosom buddies with those assholes who are shooting at us?"

"You've got a point."

“I usually do. For now though, I’d appreciate you being a little quieter.”

Any other time, she’d have told him to kiss her butt but now wasn’t the time to shoot off her big mouth. She held on, burying her face into the curve of his neck as they escaped from the men who hunted her as if she were an animal.

Well, she *was* an animal. But then she wasn’t.

Ordinarily she’d be scared out of her mind but she couldn’t concentrate on fear as this beast’s masculine scent whipped through her senses. She’d never been around men much considering her parents had kept her sheltered and isolated from the outside world for most of her life. Instantly intoxicated by his smell, she noted the racing of blood through her veins, the heat that melted her core and drenched her panties.

Lust!

Ah, yes, she’d heard of the concept. She’d never thought she’d experience it for the first time while running for her life. The fact she was so near her *time* wasn’t helping matters. Risking a glance at him she saw that his feline features had evened out into a face of pure, raw, masculine beauty. His hair was thick and dark, the color of coffee, and board-straight as it fell past his shoulders. Fierce, dark brows were drawn down above those spooky-as-hell eyes. His nose was large, masculine above a startlingly sensual mouth. Shadows accentuated the slashes of his cheekbones giving him a menacing look. He was the most arresting man she had ever seen.

A flash, a vision perhaps, zipped through her mind as she imagined those lips taking hers in a bone-melting kiss. But then the sexy vision died a quick death as he yanked open the door of a black truck, dumped her unceremoniously in the seat, and raced around to climb behind the wheel.

There was something stranger than strange about sitting next to the naked man as he jammed the key into the ignition and revved the engine of the truck. She noticed he didn’t turn on the lights but whipped the vehicle around and drove them down a dirt road, a path really, that wound its way through the woods.

A shot rang out, quickly followed by another but the sound was further away than before.

“Do you have a car somewhere?” There was urgency in his voice but he didn’t look at her, keeping his gaze on the winding path. A muscle worked in his jaw. “Answer me, woman! Do you have a car?”

The snap of his words brought her back to her senses. “A truck. Parked out on the highway not far from those big, limestone pillars. I ran out of gas and those guys were after me. I didn’t want to lead them to the king.”

The man went still and shot her a look. “Good thinking. You’re one of us.”

Trea nodded. “Yes.”

“I figured.”

The crazy men who’d chased her all the way from east Texas were still shooting but the sounds were farther and farther away now. The handsome wild-man next to her reached between them on the seat and grabbed a cell phone. Within a second, his voice rumbled through the cab. “Kev, this is Hudson. There is a truck parked near the compound entrance. Get someone out there to make the damn thing disappear. It’s out of gas. Yeah. Yeah, I know.” Trea heard a male voice on the other end but couldn’t make out what he was saying. “Be careful. There are hunters in the woods and bullets are flying. I’m taking the woman to my place until things settle down.”

His place?

Trea sat up straighter and watched him disconnect, knowing she had no choice but to go wherever he chose to take her. Until Tom Hawkins and his redneck buddy were off her tail and everyone else was safe, it was best she go with someone who actually seemed to know what hell he was doing. She barely noticed where they went. All she knew was it was the dead of night, she was in the woods and a sexy, naked man was driving.

Holding on to the door’s armrest as they bounced over ruts in the path, she went quiet and prayed this man could get them the hell out of harm’s way. The events of the

past hours swept through her. She began to tremble. Her teeth chattered so she bit down hard hoping he wouldn't hear. Though this man was a stranger, the last thing she wanted was for him to think she was a weak woman who couldn't handle herself in a crisis.

Finally they drew up in front a large, limestone house that featured a high, gabled roofline. Even in the darkness she couldn't help but admire it, realizing how much bigger it was than the modest house where she'd grown up. She noted the wide front porch and heavy iron urns filled with blood-red geraniums guarding either side of the front door. Windows boxes held more of the colorful flowers and she shot her companion a glance, wondering for a moment about a man who looked so big and rough yet bothered to plant flowers.

"Home sweet home," he said as he hit a button on the sun visor to open the door of a two-car garage. Neither of them moved until it shut again and they were engulfed in a darkness thick enough to cut with a knife. Trea heard him draw in another deep breath and then he whipped his gaze in her direction. "Are you okay?"

She managed a nod but the shaking worsened.

"Come on. Let's get you in the house."

Trea blinked and gulped a breath. "Will we be safe here?"

"Yeah."

Before she managed to get the door open he was there, helping her out. She protested but he ignored her and lifted her in his arms to carry her from the garage into the dark kitchen. He paused for a minute to send his keys sliding along a countertop. Seconds later they were in his living room.

The man who called himself Hudson settled her on a plush leather sofa and flipped on a lamp that sent soft, golden color across the well-furnished room.

"How about we start with your name?"

"Chantrea. Chantrea Morgan."

He crouched naked in front of her and took her hands. Rubbing them gently, he stared into her eyes and for the first time, she saw tenderness seep into them.

“Cambodian, isn’t it?” He cocked his head. His voice was as rough as sandpaper but he spoke slowly as if he were trying hard to put her at ease.

“Um—”

“Your name is Cambodian. Means ‘light of the moon’.”

Trea sucked in a breath. “You know the language?”

“Yeah. I fought over there. I’ve been in both World Wars, Korea and Vietnam. I actually first came here when I fought in the war for Texas Independence.”

“What is your name?”

“Hudson Cates. Want to tell me what happened to you tonight? You’re safe here. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Delayed reaction hit her like a blast. Events, terrifying and intense, rose up, threatening to choke her. But rather than answer his question she focused on something else as a vision of her father’s face in the moments before his death swam in her mind’s eye. “Did you know my father?” she whispered. “Brant Morgan? He was...um, in Vietnam.”

“No, I’m sorry. I have heard the name though. Knew most of the shifters who served over there.”

Tears she’d been holding in for hours balled up tightly in her throat as sorrow swept her. Her mom, Celia. Her dad. Gone from her life in a breath and there’d been absolutely nothing she could’ve done to save them. She’d been powerless. Knowing she couldn’t return to see to their proper burial was devastating. “They’re dead. Both of them. My mom and dad. Oh God!”

Grief manifested in a choked sob that burned her throat. Scalding tears poured from her eyes and washed down her cheeks as a shaking she could no longer contain swept her. “Those bastards shot them down. I was useless. Worse than useless!”

Hudson went still as the sounds of her wild mourning broke the quiet of the night. She looked so damn small curled in on herself like that. Her shoulders shook with the force of her sorrow. He didn't know a whole hell of a lot about loss. He'd never been a man who let people close and considering his violent past, it was no wonder. Yet her emotions swamped him. A knot of sympathy clogged his throat.

Crying women were out of his range of experience, beyond his depth. Nothing about his life had been soft and sweet. Quite the opposite. He'd been every kind of badass from the moment of his birth. Black Ops. Mercenary. Soldier. He'd killed without remorse in pursuit of any cause he'd joined but from the moment he'd inhaled her scent, he'd known he wanted to touch her and never stop. The shock of her emotions swept him like an avalanche. Rocked to his heels, he wondered at his reaction to this female. A woman's emotions were strange to him and male panthers didn't feel them. *Unless.*

Hudson went still as shock seared him.

*It couldn't be!*

Her scent should have been the first clue but he'd been too busy rushing her off to safety to think about it. For every male panther, there was only one female. One true mate. The clean, seductive scent of her had sent his pulse rocketing into overdrive from the moment he'd pressed his body to hers on the forest floor.

The sudden knowledge that this female was his mate both thrilled and alarmed him. Terrified him, too. For a man who'd known little softness, the idea of taking a woman into his life was more frightening than facing down the most hardened killer. Yet, for him, it was also a miracle.

He looked at her. Her hands were spread over her face as if she wanted to hide her tears and his heart turned over, thumping hard. Barefoot, she wore only shorts and a faded tee shirt that was several sizes too big for her slender body. Her long, blonde



curls were tangled, he suspected, from tonight's dash through the woods. Jagged scratches stretched along her legs, crisscrossing like a spider's web on her fair skin.

He'd deal with the shallow wounds later. They were nothing when compared to her broken heart. Hudson swallowed. His mouth went dry. Ignoring the way his cock rose high and hard against his belly, he came up beside her on the couch and drew her into his lap. He went still the moment her hip pressed his aching erection and he closed his eyes to gain control of his animal impulses.

Oh hell yeah, he wanted her like he needed his next breath.

A decent man would at least pull on some jeans.

Fuck decency.

She needed him now.

Wrapping her in his arms, he lowered her face to his chest and ran his hands slowly over her back. It was long and shapely. He settled his hand in the delicate dip at the base of her spine and felt his senses sizzle at the feel of her warm breath soughing over his chest. Whispering nonsense words into her soft, blonde curls, he let her cry it out.

Knowing she belonged to him in some way made the ache of helplessness burn deeper, harder.

"Shh," he whispered. "You're breakin' my heart, woman."

"Hurts." Her wide, mobile mouth moved over his flesh. The warmth of her breath sent seductive fingers over limbs and down his torso. Lust curled low in his belly but he fought it back.

"I know, honey."

Finally she lifted her face and Hudson was lost in a pair of tear-drenched mossy green eyes. They were swollen but he thought they were the prettiest he'd ever seen. A man could get lost in something so sweet and deep. Her parted lips were full and utterly irresistible to a man who wore loneliness like a battered winter coat. Unable to

stop himself, he cupped her face with one hand and traced the line of her high cheekbone with his thumb. "Don't cry. Can't bear it."

His gaze focused on her lips. He heard her quick in-drawn breath and felt the awareness that zipped through her system as if it were his own. "I'm hurting you," she whispered.

"Your grief hurts me. Yes."

"Oh my gods! Hudson?" She shook her head as wonder filled her eyes. "You—"

Giving her no time to speculate further, Hudson did what he'd wanted to do from the moment he'd pinned her to the forest floor. A low, coughing sound burst from his throat as he took her lips and drank the tiny sound she made. He scraped his teeth over her bottom lip, then slid his tongue across the surface before sending it deep into her warm mouth. She went still for a split second before sinking into him. Her despair was like a living thing, yet there was something more, something needy that drew him. Hauling her closer, he felt the soft flesh of her breasts. The puckered tips of her nipples pressed against his chest with a heat that burned like a brand. When she opened to him fully, he stroked her tongue, the walls of her cheeks and felt her response burst over him like a softly whispered prayer.

Offering comfort in the only way he could, he traced her cheek and the slim column of her throat. His hand found her shoulder and he dug his fingers deep to hold her to him. Random emotions swept from her to him, wild things that caused his heartbeat to speed to a frantic pace. His cock ached to possess her, to plunge deep into the comfort of her body and before he could stop himself, he arched against her hip.

Chantrea broke the kiss and settled her mouth on his shoulder. "This is wrong on so many levels."

"Maybe you should stop thinking. Just for a little while. I'm not a man to take advantage of a grieving woman. Gods! You're shaking like a leaf. Let me try to help, Trea."

With a soft sound, she looked up at him, tiny wrinkles forming between her brows. "How can you know my parents always called me that?" she whispered.

"Trea?" He firmed his lips and settled a hand at the small of her back. Finally he shook his head, feeling her bewilderment. It matched his own. "Can't explain it. I just know. It feels right."

"But I—"

Just then Hudson's phone rang. Scowling, he snatched it up and glanced at the screen to see Titus Declan's name displayed. Quickly, he pressed the button and answered. "My king."

She went still in his arms and he felt her tension as if it were his own. As he listened to the words of the King of the Turquoise Moon panthers, Hudson ran one hand soothingly down Trea's arm. After a moment, her body relaxed on an exhaled breath.

"Something has happened," Titus said. "Kevin just called about a truck stranded near the entrance to the compound. Want to update me?"

"Yeah. I found a woman running through the woods with a couple of hunters hot on her heels. She's one of us. Her parents were just killed and she came here for sanctuary."

Silence fell for a moment. "Mahara and I are on our way. We need to speak with her."

"Can this possibly wait until morning, my king? Chantrea is exhausted and she's already been through so much tonight."

"Right. Thoughtless of me," Titus murmured. "Tomorrow morning then."

Hudson set the phone aside. Trea looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes and smiled shakily. "Thank you."

He swept her tangled hair back then pressed a kiss to her forehead. Compassion swamped him. "Come on. Let's get you settled in for the night. How does that sound? Tomorrow is going to be busy and I think maybe you need some time to decompress."

Just lean on me. I'll take care of everything." With that, he stood, still holding her in his arms and carried her into the bathroom.

### Chapter Three

The instant Hudson walked into the bathroom adjoining the master bedroom and sat her carefully on the lid of the toilet, she looked around. "Pretty," she whispered, taking it all in. "So big."

Hoping to lighten the mood, he reached into a cabinet to find cotton pads and antiseptic and smiled at her. Admittedly dealing with grief-stricken females was out of his element, so Hudson gratefully grasped at straws. "I like my creature comforts."

Though his home was modest by the standards of most wealthy men, he was proud of the place he'd built. Over the many long years of his life he, like most of his species, had amassed and lost fortunes. Eventually he'd built a home on the compound property in the hopes he'd one day raise a family here. The tiled bathroom was spacious, featuring plants in the etched glass windows. All done in neutral, male-pleasing tones. He'd ensured the tub was as large as a small boat and the single glass-enclosed shower featured every amenity. Near the toilet was a countertop featuring a sink with two basins.

"I don't think I've ever seen a bathroom quite this big before."

"Hey, I'm a big guy," he said, setting the medicine on the cabinet before heading to the far end of the enormous bathroom to start water in the bathtub. Returning to her, he hunkered down and reached for her hands, which were held limply in her lap. Hudson sent his thumbs over the backs of them, marveling at the softness of her skin. Her flesh was warm, bordering on hot. "I want you to feel at home here. Tell me, please, if you need anything." Concentrating on the task at hand, he reached for the medicine and cotton pads and went to work on the network of scratches on her legs. Frowning over his task, he noted a particularly nasty one that stretched from her ankle, across her calf,

and ended at the sensitive bend of her knee. "This might sting a little. Deep breath, sweetheart."

The endearment whispered out before he could stop it but she didn't comment as he swiped the medicine-soaked pad over the wound. She gasped at the burn and quickly he blew a breath over it to soothe her. Unbelievably, the scratch healed itself in an instant and his eyes went wide. Snapping his gaze upward, he looked at her. "I thought you were unmated."

"I am. I'm just –"

"Dear gods," he said, shocked at the sandpaper rough quality of his own voice. "You are nearing your time. How long have you felt the changes coming over you?"

Among their kind, a female nearing her time of change would begin to notice things like poor vision suddenly repaired and injuries that were quick to heal. Those changes sent up red flags to a woman of their species that she'd better hurry and find a mate or face a world of hurt. The conversion from human to panther was violent and sometimes deadly.

Trea's fair skin flushed, bright color splashing over her cheeks. "For a month or more." She looked away, her embarrassment painfully obvious. Hudson's heart turned over. Placing a finger on her chin, he gently turned her face and stared intently into her eyes. "Do not be ashamed of this. Not with me. What you are going through is natural to our kind."

A pained look was stamped on her pretty face and then she swept her eyes down his naked body. His cock responded, hardening, to rise high against his belly as she studied him. Hudson wanted nothing more in that moment than to lay her down on the cold marble floors and fuck her as he wanted. And not just any woman would do. He wanted *her*. Her scent, her beauty, everything about her called to him on an elemental level he'd never experienced before. Hudson stood, ignoring the way her eyes drank in the sight of his nude body. Claspng her shoulders, he pulled her up and stalked to the

tub. Steam rolled from the surface of the water and being a cautious man, he drew his hand through it to test it. It wouldn't do to have her tender skin burned.

Hudson shook his head. What the fuck was wrong with him? He was suddenly as sappy as a lovesick pup and he barely knew the woman who sat quietly watching him. Shit! But he knew enough.

She was his.

He'd waited hundreds of years to find his one, true mate and here she was. He wasn't about to let her slip through his fingers. Turning, forcing a smile to his face, he walked up to her. "Can you manage from here? A nice soak will help, I promise. Do you need some help?"

Hudson wanted nothing more than to yank that huge tee shirt from her body and shove those skimpy shorts from her hips to strip her bare, but damn it, he wasn't a creep. She was scared, traumatized and downright shocky. If he had his way about things, he'd claim her and protect her from this moment on but it was too soon to act on that now. She needed to heal. To accept.

"I-I can do it," she said as she made her way across the room to the tub. Trea looked up at him and smiled. "You've been so kind. I don't know how to thank you."

Unable to stop himself, Hudson leaned close and pressed his lips to her forehead. "No thanks necessary. I'll be just outside if you need anything."

Trea looked up at him unable to disguise the sheen of tears in her eyes. "Thank you. I'll be fine."

Hudson beat a retreat from the room, relieved when heard the splash of water on the other side of the closed door. Briefly, he fisted his hand around the base of his cock and dragged it up and then down in a futile attempt to bring down his lust just a notch. Trea's scent still filled his head He leaned against the cool wood and closed his eyes, imaging her naked and soaking in his tub. With a low growl, he headed back into the living room and grabbed up his cell phone. His call with Titus had been brief but there were details to discuss.

“My king, I’m sorry to disturb you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m still awake.”

“It struck me that Trea will want to see to the burial of her parents,” Hudson said. “She’s grieving. Not only is this eating at her, but we need to do something to explain away why their home is suddenly empty.”

Titus sighed over the phone. “Already on it, Hudson. Kevin dug through the glove box of the truck and we’ve located their place through the address on the car insurance papers. I’ve already dispatched a private plane to east Texas. With some computer digging, I learned that Brant Morgan had already quit his job in the oil fields. No one will think much about the house being suddenly empty. Kevin and his men are retrieving the bodies of Brant and Celia Morgan as we speak. They’ll be brought here to Sanctuary for proper burial. I believe, if the hunters who shot them down were in hot pursuit of Chantrea, they neglected the panthers they’d shot. The bastards.”

“Yeah. If I could I’d kill them myself.”

“I’m glad you found her in the woods, Hudson. She couldn’t be in better hands.”

Hudson barked a sound. “I’m not so sure about that, my king.” He wanted to do disreputable things to her sweet body and knowing that she was exhausted was the only damn thing holding him back. He felt like the biggest of creeps.

“I doubt that, Hudson. In all the many years I have known you, you have done nothing less than what is honorable and right.”

When they disconnected, Hudson went to a drawer and pulled out of pair of worn sweatpants. He didn’t need further affirmation that he was hard and horny and wanted to fuck the woman lolling just a few steps away in his bathtub. As an afterthought, he pulled out his largest, softest tee shirt for Chantrea to use. She had come to him with nothing but the clothes on her back, after all.

Knitting his brow, he tossed the tee shirt to the foot of his king-sized bed before neatly pulling down the bedspread and sheets. He’d take the guest room tonight and give her the space she would no doubt need. Poor little thing had a lot to come to grips



with. He didn't know a damn thing about comforting women but he wasn't a fool. Her life had changed completely in the blink of an eye. But he would be here when she finally needed him. Hudson already knew he would claim her when the time came and in the interim, he would use every bit of charm at his disposal to make her more accepting of the fact that she was his.

Roughly thirty minutes later, he realized there was no sound, no movement coming from the bathroom. Hudson stood by the closed bathroom door, hesitant to disturb her but worried. Rapping lightly, he called out. "Are you okay, Trea?"

No answer.

He opened the door and moved into the steam-filled bathroom to see her lying in the water. Her eyes were closed but even with the slight camouflage of the water, he noted the trembling of her limbs. Tears seeped from beneath closed eyelids to trail down her cheeks. His heart thumped hard. Unable to resist, he sent his gaze over her naked body. She was slender yet curvy in all the best ways. Her breasts were full, crowned by soft pink nipples. The flare of her hips made his fingers itch to stroke. Her legs were long, sexy stems that he wanted wrapped around his waist as he pounded his cock deep into her willing body. Tamping down the instant surge of wildly inappropriate lust, he bent over her just as her eyes fluttered open. "Let me help you," he said, his voice gone rough with tenderness and passion.

Trea was lost in her grief and it was more than obvious to him. He reached for a towel and helped her get out of the water. Once she stood shakily by the side of the tub, he gently dried her, careful to keep his touch casual. Her state of mind was fragile and he didn't want to make a misstep with her after all she'd been through.

"Thank you, Hudson," she whispered as he draped the oversized towel around her.

He tucked her beneath his arm and, leading her directly into his room, grabbed up the tee shirt and tugged it into place on her body. The thing swallowed her whole but at least it was clean. "Sit here and let me deal with these tangles."

Obediently, she sat while he fetched a brush to deal with the mess of her hair. Sitting behind her on the bed, he heard her sigh as he carefully untangled the wet strands. "Almost finished."

"Too curly."

"Nah, it's pretty. Long and thick." He set the brush aside and pulled her gently back until she rested against his chest. His arms went around her. "All finished. Do you think you can sleep?"

"I'll try. I don't know when I've ever felt so tired. At first, when everything happened, this weird adrenaline rush went through me and there wasn't time to do anything but run. Now I'm, I don't know, just sorta numb."

Hudson pressed his lips to the top of her damp head. "Understandable. But listen, honey, you don't need to think now. Plenty of time for that tomorrow, okay? Just rest here. Your body and mind need it."

Trea's head rolled until her cheek rested against his chest. Her breath swept warm over his chest. He went still. "I'll be in the guest room, if you need me."

Immediately she sucked in a breath and tilted her head to look at him. Panic filled her eyes. "No! I can't let you give up your bed. It's not right."

"To hell with that. There is more room here for you." Hudson disentangled himself from her and stood. Scooting her along the mattress, he pulled the covers down farther and then settled the sheet over her. "If you need anything, holler, okay?" he smiled, hoping to put her at ease.

Reluctantly, he turned but then stopped when she grabbed his hand. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw her eyes were wide and imploring. "Please stay with me, Hudson. I don't want to be alone tonight."

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea, darlin'," he murmured, careful to keep his voice soft. "If I sleep beside you I'm liable to think of things I shouldn't. You aren't ready for what I have in mind. Not yet. You are an unmated female nearing her time of change. This is a dangerous proposition."

In answer she released his hand and scooted to the far side of the bed and mustering a smile, patted the wide empty spot with the palm of her hand. "There's lots of room, Hudson. Please. I promise I'm not in any state of mind to jump your bones as gorgeous as those bones might be." She released a shuddering breath and Hudson relented despite the fact her praise of his "bones" did spectacular things to the size of his cock.

It seemed he couldn't tell the female *no*. He frowned but despite his better judgment crawled into the bed beside her. Instantly the fresh, clean scent of her wrapped around him like a seductive balm. When she sighed, he gave up and stretched out, realizing he'd resigned himself to a night of torment. Pushing those thoughts aside, he reached out and trailed a hand down the length of her arm. "Sleep now, honey. I'm here if you need me."

\* \* \* \* \*

*A cloud of red fogged her mind, swirling through her sleep, sneaking like a thief. Voices, wavery and indistinct poured over her but she couldn't see their faces. Her parents. Their cries. They called her name and Trea squinted to bring them into view only to see them fade again behind the tall, muscular body of Hudson Cates. He was naked. Even in a dream, his scent filled her head, heated her blood, calling to primitive instincts she'd never known she possessed. He held out his hand but her gaze kept searching for the beloved faces of her parents. Finally they were there again, behind Hudson, smiling before fading again. Her heart pounded. Tears poured unchecked down her face at their loss and still Hudson held out his hand to her, his stern face gone soft with some unnamed emotion. She stepped toward him, reaching for the comfort he offered when something grabbed her from behind. The force yanked her backward, making her head swim. In her dream, she called out and saw Hudson's eyes go wide.*

Then warmth covered her, seemed to surround her, so real she could almost touch it. Trea opened her eyes in the pre-dawn darkness to the feel of tears streaming and Hudson bending over her to drink them with his tongue. Yanked from her sleepy state, she sucked in a breath to see his spooky-as-hell eyes staring down at her.

“Shh. Shh, now. I’m here.” Hudson’s lips rubbed lightly over her damp cheeks and his dark hair brushed along her throat until his mouth finally found the tender flesh there. His breath, warm and heavy, moved across the column of her neck. “You were crying in your sleep, sweetheart.”

His warm torso pressed to her belly and chest and she realized vaguely that sometime during the night her borrowed tee shirt had slipped up to settle just above her breasts. Somehow none of it mattered. His scent filled her head with a knowledge as old as their species, as infinite as time. He belonged to her and in some raw elemental way he planned to stake his claim.

Who was she to refuse?

Since she’d been a young girl, she’d known this moment would come for her. Had hoped and prayed for it. Scent recognition was impossible to ignore. Yes, she’d been sheltered for most of her life but neither was she a fool.

Closing her eyes, she absorbed the feel of his tenderness. “I’m sorry,” she whispered raggedly.

“For what?”

“Waking you.”

“Hell, Trea, do you think I could sleep for a second anyway? Lying next to you? Worrying about you? Wanting you?” He rose up on his elbow and drew his hand through her hair slowly as if examining each strand. His gaze focused in on her. “You know what you are to me, don’t you?”

*Mate.*

“Mate. Yours.” Her face burned at the knowledge in his eyes. Soon, maybe even now, he would know her body better than she did herself. Hudson would be the man to see her through the flashfire that would rage through her body and for the rest of time Trea would belong solely to him. He had to know how crazy he was making her. Trea was so close to the beginning of her time, teetering like a drunken acrobat on a high

wire. She dragged the scent of him into her lungs. A shiver stole through her body. Moisture rained from her pussy to dampen her inner thighs. "You smell like heaven."

Hudson flashed a wicked smile, a hint of fang shining in the darkness. Her body reacted as if not her own. Heat whipped through her system, swirling through her core and setting up a wild pulsation in her pussy. A small moan broke free and unable to stop herself, she squirmed against the bed. One of Hudson's legs, covered by the soft cotton of his sweat pants, was draped over one of hers. His cock was long, thick and hard pressed against her leg. His heat, his passion, burned her through the layer of fabric.

"Uh-uh, heaven would be you, Trea. I need you more than my next breath but I'm not about to fuck you now. You are grieving. Hurt. I'm not a goddamn monster. But if you don't let me comfort you now, I'm going to lose my mind."

Before she would form words to respond, his lips found her throat, his fangs teased, nibbling gently at her skin. Chain lightning ripped through her blood as the tears continued to fall. There was simply no name for this need. This intensity. Power surrounded her as her arms went around him to discover each ridge and bump of his wide shoulders. She felt so connected to this stranger. His lips brushed her jaw. His hand kneaded the soft flesh of her belly before dipping to settle in the tender notch between her thigh and groin. Hudson's thumb stroked with deliberate intent along skin that was suddenly far too hot and she wanted more.

"I'm so alone, Hudson. Keep touching me. Please. Make me forget. Take me away."

Lifting his head, his eyes burning with dark intent, he teased her bottom lip with his teeth once, twice before licking along it to soothe. "You're not alone. I'm here. I'll always be here. Lean on me. I'll touch you until you tell me to stop. I swear to the gods it'll be the hardest thing I ever did but I'll do it for you." A low, desperate sound broke from his lips seconds before he kissed her. The tender savagery stole her breath as he sent his tongue deep to stroke the walls of her cheeks, her teeth, her tongue and with no further encouragement she kissed him back. Grief, passion and homecoming swept her.

Yeah, she was a novice at this stuff but at this moment she didn't feel like an innocent. She felt like a woman. A woman who hungered for her man.

Losing herself in the kiss, she hesitated only briefly at the feel of his broad hand stroking over the length of her bare torso. He rubbed lazy circles over her belly, lingered in the notch of her waist, and dragged the tips of his fingers down her ribs and up again. No man had ever touched her yet the familiarity of that warmth stole into her heart, giving her a confidence she'd never known and when at last, he cupped her breast, thumbing the nipple, she gasped into the heat of his mouth. His answering groan rolled through her veins like wine. Trea closed her eyes, absorbing the intimate connection into her bones. His thick cock pressed firmly against her thigh. Helplessly she pressed against it, writhing on the mattress. Just that simple movement had him crawling between her spread thighs, to press that length against her core.

A low moan ripped from her throat as he dragged his cock back and forth over the wet folds. Like a man who had all the time in the world, Hudson taunted her with the thick stalk, pressing firmly against her drenched pussy with each pass. Pleasure swept her up, dragged her under until her fingers curled over his sides, digging in.

"Hudson!"

"Hold on," he breathed. "Just getting started."

Dear Gods! Just getting started?

Already she felt ready to implode. Her nerves sizzled then screamed as he latched onto a nipple and sucked gently at first, then harder. Hudson's teeth gently scraped over tender flesh, his tongue prodded then drew slowly, methodically before taking the tasting deep enough to send her lower body into a frenzy of motion.

Pleasure raced wicked fingers over her flesh coiling like a cobra in her belly and without volition, Trea sent her legs around his hips. Her heels dug into the hard globes of his firm, muscular ass as her body screamed for more. Arching against his rigid cock, seeking an answer to every question she'd ever had about men and sex, she raised her hips up to meet each thrust of his erection. Sweat beaded on her forehead and trickled

down to get lost in her hair. Needing to touch him, to test the reality of this explosive pleasure, she sent her fingers into his thick hair, holding him to her, loving the way he worshipped her breast. "Hudson. This feels so incredible. I didn't know. Never realized."

He released her nipple with a soft pop of sound and raised his head. "Tell me now. Is this what you want?"

"How can you even ask it?"

Hudson surprised her by moving to his knees between her legs. Her gaze, drawn instantly to his massive, well-defined chest, cruised over washboard abs. Her mouth went dry. "I never imagined," she breathed.

"What?"

"That my mate would be so beautiful."

His nostrils flared and he did his own study of her body. She should feel like the worst kind of slut spread out, practically naked, this way but she didn't. *Turned-on* didn't begin to cover it. Overcome with need for him, she cupped her breasts as another quick flash of heat surged through her body.

"Fuck, honey. You're killing me here." Hudson reached down and fisted her rumpled tee shirt. After he'd yanked it off and tossed it aside, he studied her for several frozen seconds then stood to take off his sweat pants. He presented his back leaving her free to gawk as she wanted. Trea rolled to her side to watch, knowing in that moment she'd never get enough of looking at him.

His hair, slightly wavy, and oh so thick, brushed along his broad shoulders. His back rippled with muscle when he moved. Finally he turned back to her and Chantrea's breath hitched. Standing there, looking like a warrior from a time gone by, he reached down to grab the base of his erect penis and drag his fist up the length. His cock was thick and long rising up to his belly. Beneath it, his balls were drawn tight. Trea wondered what they'd feel like in her hands.

“Not gonna last,” he said, closing his eyes on a low groan. When he finally opened them again, his gaze focused on her like a laser. “I hope you’re ready for me, darlin’.”

She couldn’t speak but then she didn’t have to because suddenly he was there again. Spreading her legs with a firm touch, Hudson moved between them, staring down at her with those intensely spooky blue eyes. They were so pale they practically glowed in the dark. Finally he narrowed them and reached down to tease the petals of her sex with his fingers. As if hypnotized, Trea stared as he studied her exposed pussy. Continually plying her flesh, he finally sent one finger deep.

Trea went still.

She sucked in a gasp and closed her eyes.

Sensation swamped her with that intimate touch filling her with the greatest need she’d ever known. Letting go of the pain of death, the terror of the past night, she could only feel as she met each thrust of his finger into her body. He added another and the feeling of fullness intensified. Above her, his breathing turned heavy and speeded up. She’d never had sex but instincts as old as time kicked in. Knowing he wanted her filled her up with power until all that was left was a raging yearning to take this journey with him.

“So wet. So pretty. Mine.”

When he removed his fingers, Trea looked at him. “Hudson.”

“Ready?”

“Yeah. Oh yes.”

He gripped his heavy cock and settled the head at the entrance to her body. Briefly he closed his eyes as if the feel of her wet flesh was too much to bear. “Thank the gods.”

Then Hudson pressed, pushed until the thick head dipped into her channel. Her body clenched in anticipation and Trea held her breath only to expel it in a rush as he plunged his cock deep. Nerve endings she didn’t know she possessed sat up and sang. Reaching out she clung to the bed linens as if they’d save her from the intensity of the



pleasure washing over her. Hudson lifted her legs, draping her thighs over his as he fucked her slowly, powerfully, each heavy plunge wiping her mind clear of everything but the here and now. Swamped, overcome, her fingers flexed on the soft cotton of the sheets and then Hudson rotated his pelvis against her clit. Pleasure zipped through her pussy in a shocking wave. Her inner walls tightened to clasp his meaty cock and a low, helpless sound broke from her lips.

She reached for him.

Suddenly he was there, leaning over her, enabling Trea to touch his chest with eager fingers. Plunging, thrusting, pounding deep, he increased the pace melding his body to hers until she didn't know where he began and she ended. Her belly tightened. Heat raced over her flesh. Her mind cleared of everything but the way he made her feel. A heavy coil tightened in her belly then released in a flurry of motion. Trea closed her eyes against the lights that seemed to swim before her eyes as her body flew apart in a release so overpowering she cried out, clinging to the man above her.

Lost. She was lost.

Hudson went still above her as she rode his cock, a woman overcome, frantic, and then finally, finally he thrust again, his groan a song in her ears.

"Trea! Gods!"

Once more, then again, he pounded deep and then a shudder rolled through his big body. His gritted teeth flashed white. A hint of fang glinted as he made a coughing sound.

Panther. Beast. Hers.

Above her, Hudson stiffened, his head dropping down to settle on her breast as he lost control and spurted deep in her body until there was nothing left but him and her. Together. Overcome by the moment, by the passion, Trea dipped her fingers into his thick hair until he finally settled over her, a warm blanket protecting her from the world and all its sorrows.

## **Chapter Four**

Fresh from a quick shower, Hudson stood beside the bed and looked down at his sleeping mate. Earlier, hard morning sunlight had streamed into the room and since he wanted her to sleep, he slid the plantation shutters closed to give her relief from the harsh glare. Chantrea lay sleeping as the now-softer light washed over her. Seeing her this way, in the light of day, was a revelation to him. Yes, he knew she was beautiful but now her delicate features were more emphasized.

His heart thumped hard and his body reacted.

She slept so peacefully now. Her lashes lay like spiky fans against her fair cheeks and her blonde curls provided the only drop of color against his stark white sheets. Unable to resist, he brushed his hand over her hair, gently, when he had never before been a gentle man. Like some kind of voyeur, he studied the small, slightly upturned nose and noted with remorse, the faint darkness under eyes that he knew were a deep mossy green. The poor little thing had been to hell and back and he vowed then and there he would spend his life protecting her and hopefully making her happy.

Chantrea Morgan was lovely. Pride filled him at the knowledge that she belonged to him. Male panthers didn't have a choice in the mate provided by the gods and he'd learned long ago not to place much value in such frivolity as outward appearances. But Hudson wasn't a fool. His mate was beautiful and he was glad about that. Hoping she would sleep awhile longer, he tugged the sheet up over her shoulders and carefully tucked her in before turning to head for the kitchen.

After he put on the coffee, he started frying mass quantities of bacon and set out a dozen eggs as thoughts of the previous eventful night scrambled through his brain. He pretty much figured it was providence that had caused him to head out into the night for a run. Thank the gods! He shuddered at the thought of what might have happened

to Trea had things been different. No doubt she was traumatized after witnessing the murder of her folks. She was exhausted from the frantic drive in her race to escape.

Hudson clenched his teeth.

The scent of brewing coffee and frying bacon filled the large kitchen but he barely noticed. As a man who'd fought for his country in almost every war throughout U.S. history, he knew timing was everything and usually luck played little part in things. Yet, the events of his finding Trea when she most needed help had been just that. Pure luck.

Or a blessing.

After last night's scare, he didn't plan to let the woman out of his sight. Ever.

Hudson carried a platter of crispy bacon to the table, quickly cooked up eggs, and poured himself a cup of coffee. Sliding glass doors led to an outside patio and Hudson walked over to look out at his backyard. Downing a bit of much needed caffeine, he wondered what she'd think of the house he'd built here. It was big, no doubt, but could she be happy here? Hudson blew out a breath and narrowed his eyes as he took in the backyard pool and the wooden gazebo he'd built nearby. Patio tables and chairs and a state-of-the-art sound system were new additions. He liked it fine but would she? And what about the rest of the place? Hell, he didn't know shit about decorating a house to a lady's specifications. Thank the gods, Mahara had added her touches. Carrying his cup to the table, he figured Trea would have free rein in doing anything she wanted around here.

This was her home now, after all.

Hudson looked up at a sound in the doorway. Trea stood there wearing his oversized tee shirt, hair damp and curling, and her face rosy from a shower. She gave him an uncertain look, her lips curling into a slight smile. "Um. Morning."

She was obviously unused to morning-afters and her embarrassment was palpable. Couldn't have that now could he? So he went straight to her and without hesitation,

pulled her into his arms. The tension in her body dissolved as she expelled a breath and buried her nose against his chest. Hudson pressed his face to her damp hair.

“Mornin’, darlin. How did you sleep?”

“Not bad,” she whispered. She finally lifted her head, still wearing that uncertain smile. “All things considered.”

He knew she was thinking about what had happened to them in the wee morning hours but she was distracted by other things too. Her grief was obvious. Tenderly, he led her to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair for her. She offered her thanks when she sat and then eyed the mountain of food on the table. “Smells good but I don’t think I can do this justice.”

“You have to eat,” he said as he grabbed a plate and filled it with eggs, bacon and toast. Yeah, she was a little thing and this was no doubt far too much food. “You need to keep up your strength. Let me take care of you.”

Hudson took a chair beside her and, finding he was hungry enough to eat a bear, he piled eggs and bacon onto his plate and dug in. Finally he looked up to see her poking at her food with a fork, noting she’d barely touched a thing. Reaching out he plucked up a slice of bacon and held it to her lips. “Come on, honey. Open up.”

Suddenly she grinned. “Bossy, aren’t you?”

He grunted. “Been accused of that a few times.”

Trea took the bacon from him and bit into it following that up with a swig of orange juice. “Thanks for taking such good care of me.”

“It’s my job.” Her sudden frown made him wish to recall the casual words. He reached across the expanse of the table and took her free hand. “You aren’t a burden, Trea. Don’t think that for a second. I’ve waited for years to find my mate and I’m damn sure glad you’re here, despite the circumstances.”

Her eyes connected with his as if to examine the truth of his words and he realized she was rather meticulous about things. Careful. Cautious. He liked that about her. Finally she nodded. "Then so am I, Hudson. We'll make this work."

He grinned. "Damn right we will. Now eat. You need your strength."

"What's going to happen now?" she asked finally, daintily applying a napkin to her mouth before folding her hands in her lap.

"I'm not sure. I talked with Titus last night and I imagine he has set the wheels in motion to take care of things. I'm pretty sure we'll talk with him eventually but honey, I don't want you to worry about things. We protect our own around here. I want you to rest and take care of yourself. Let us handle the details."

"My brother has to be told." Her eyes filled and she blinked furiously to keep them at bay. "Max. He's a detective with the Houston Police Department."

Hudson nodded. Naturally he had known of the tough panther male for many years with Titus often mentioning how he wished he would become a part of Sanctuary. The security force of Declan Technologies where Hudson worked could use such a man. Hudson agreed. "He'll be contacted. For all we know he could be heading this way now."

"I hope so," she whispered.

He noted the faraway look in her eyes and felt a sharp pang in his heart knowing she thought of home and family. One day he'd give all of that back to her. Not the same, of course, but something to equal it in the family they would make together. Hudson stood and started gathering up the breakfast dishes.

Trea went to her feet, her chair scraping lightly against the tiled floor. "No, you cooked. Let me."

"I've got it."

"Damn it, Hudson, I'm not helpless." The sharp edge of temper surprised him and suddenly he laughed.

“Sheath your claws, darlin. We’ll do it together.”

“I’m sorry, Hudson.” Trea shook her head. “I’m normally not bitchy but I’m feeling just a little on edge.”

“Understandable.”

Together they carried plates and platters to the sink, loaded the dishwasher and took care of business until Trea paused by the table, a damp cloth in hand, and gasped. The cloth dropped to the floor when she gripped the wooden surface with both hands. Her legs appeared shaky and barely able to hold her weight. Alarmed, Hudson rushed up and saw her eyes wide, frantic and dilated. Sweat beaded along her hairline. Her breathing accelerated. “Hudson! Wha—”

It was obvious to Hudson that her *time* was rushing toward her like a runaway train. The truth hit him like a punch. He swiped his hands across the surface of the table and the salt and pepper shakers crashed to the floor along with two remaining coffee cups but he couldn’t give a hot damn about that.

“Hang on,” he murmured as he whipped the oversized tee shirt over her head. Her pink nipples were pearled into tight little knots but he couldn’t take the time necessary to appreciate the little beauties as he wanted. Lifting her slightly he spread her out on the now-bare table like an after dinner dessert, noting the dampness glistening between her thighs. Hudson spread her open absorbing the sight of her drenched beauty. Heat rolled from her body in waves that seemed to wrap him up like a warm blanket and the scent of her lust, that instant flash of passion filled his nostrils. His cock, already hard, thickened farther behind the fly of his jeans.

He ached. Wanted. Had to have her.

But this moment wasn’t about him. It wasn’t about his hunger or his own need for release. This moment was all about her. With most females of their kind, the heated moments, the intense desire came unexpectedly and sporadically until full-blown heat occurred. He didn’t think she was there yet but close. Her need would be almost painful for her and he couldn’t bear it.

“Please help. Now. Now.” The words burst from her lips as he swept his palms up her inner thighs, capturing her wetness as he went. “Touch me. H-hurry.”

Her frantic plea didn't go unheeded. No time to play. The sound of her breathing sped up seconds before he plunged two fingers deep into her soaked pussy. Instantly, her vaginal walls clenched around them but he knew what she needed. He planned to give it to her. In, out, in, out, he rammed them deep and hard, careful to circle and press her clit with each pass. Spread out on the top of the table, Trea writhed and when he crooked his fingers to stroke her G-spot, she came almost violently as her fists hammered the tabletop as if it were a drum. He rode the wave out with her, his fingers continually stroking until she eased but then the instant he drew away, she started to peak again.

Hudson bent to her and, grabbing her bare ass with both hands, began to eat her out. Her flesh was meltingly sweet against the lash of his tongue. Trea went still for a single heartbeat then wild beneath him as he sucked her swollen clit gently and then with more force. He sent his tongue on a teasing quest through the flushed petals of her sex before stiffening it, thrusting it deep into her pussy. She was game for anything he wanted, pliant under his mouth as he ate her, a man starving for yet another taste and loving the little gasping sounds that burst from her throat. Her choked cries poured out spurring him on as he licked, nibbled and sucked her tender flesh and then her hands were there, stroking his shoulders and neck before clasping fistfuls of his hair to hang on as if for dear life. Her body heat swept over him seconds before she went still. Tense as a drawn bow, her back arched against the hard surface of the table an instant before she flew apart again.

She was gasping for breath by the time he began to kiss his way up her body. To know she was still amazed him. Hudson settled his lips on her belly then brushed the curve of her ribs with his tongue and in a final act of satisfaction laid his ear against her chest as her heart pounded out a frantic song. Her fingers gentled in his hair as she struggled to catch her breath. “Gods! I never knew, never imagined,” she whispered.

Hudson lifted his head and looked at her. Her pretty eyes were at half-mast, her cheeks flushed. Sliding marginally up her body, he pressed his lips to hers. "Just the beginning. How many times has this happened?"

Trea closed her eyes and sighed. "You mean this overwhelming lust? This feeling that I have little to no control over my body?" She shook her head. "This is the third time in a matter of a few weeks. It happened now and early this morning but the first time—"

"The first time?"

She finally looked at him, smiling a little. "At home. Dad was off at work. It was just Mom and me. Fortunately she had supplies."

He knew about the turning from woman to graceful panther but only in a secondhand sense. He'd never served as a second nor had he ever conversed with a female panther on such personal matters. "Supplies?"

Color climbed over her cheeks and though he knew she was embarrassed she kept her gaze steady on him. Had to admire that. "Um, a vibrator. She had a new vibrator loaded with batteries and handy for me. She realized my time was close. After a while the moment passed."

Belatedly Hudson realized she was lying supine on a very hard surface so backing away, he tenderly lifted her until she sat on the table's edge. He stood between her spread knees and reached for her. "So it's headed your way. Thank the gods I found you."

Trea turned her face to rest against his chest. Her voice went low. "I think that's why Dad quit his job and was planning to come here. My parents didn't keep secrets from each other and surely she told him that my time was coming. He was afraid for me."

"A good father."

"The best."



"Trea, I—" he began and then the doorbell rang, jarring him. He stepped back, a curse on his lips, and reached for a remote control sitting on the kitchen counter. He turned on a television mounted on the wall and pressed channel three. The state-of-the-art security cameras he'd installed worked just fine, he noted, as he saw Titus Declan and Mahara waiting at the front door. Stepping to a unit on the wall, he pressed the button. "Give us a minute, my king."

"Take your time," was Titus' reply.

Hudson released the switch and turned to find Trea shrugging into the tee shirt he'd flung to the floor earlier. He went to her and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Relax, honey."

"How can you say that? I'll be meeting my king and queen wearing your tee shirt and nothing else. Goodness gracious, I'm so embarrassed."

*Goodness gracious.*

The old-fashioned term made him smile considering minutes earlier she'd been screaming his name as she'd been spread out on the kitchen table like a twenty dollar buffet. He reached out and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Go into the bedroom and look in the bottom drawer of my dresser. I have some sweat pants with a drawstring. Pull them on. They'll be way too big but at least you'll be properly covered."

Trea groaned and spinning around, rushed for the doorway. "I'm so embarrassed. I can't believe this," she muttered, heading out.

"And grab me a tee shirt, would you?"

When she answered in the affirmative, Hudson managed to suppress his smile and dragged his fingers through his hair, restoring some order to it. He headed out of the kitchen, walked through the dining room and was just entering the living room when Trea emerged, clutching his favorite Grateful Dead tee shirt. He shrugged into it, murmuring his thanks then gave her an appraising look. "You are just fine. Better than fine. No fretting now."

Hudson watched Trea absently bite down on her bottom lip. It was a nervous gesture he'd seen from her before. Oddly, she looked adorable in his oversized clothing but he promised himself that scrounging up things that fit would be his first order of business.

After dealing with his king, of course.

"Hang on," he murmured, giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze before heading across the room. Hudson threw open the door to find the mighty Titus Declan filling up the space. His black hair hung loose to his shoulders and he wore jeans and a solid black tee shirt. He was built like a goddamn bulldozer. Mahara, his mate, stood by his side, worry etched on her lovely face.

"My king."

As custom dictated, Hudson stepped aside and bent his head as Titus and Mahara swept into the room. Titus' mate carried a small, red overnight bag, which she immediately set on the floor at her feet. Chantrea stood watching them and within mere seconds, his queen dashed across the room to pull the new arrival against her in an enveloping hug. "We've been so worried. Are you all right? I'm so glad you found Sanctuary."

The women clung together for a moment. When they separated, Titus cleared his throat then stalked across the room to stand before Chantrea. Her head was bowed but when he placed a hand on her shoulder, she looked up at him. "My king."

"Rest easy," he said gently. "The hunters have left the area. Your truck has been moved onto the compound and you're safe."

"Thank you," she whispered. "I'm in your debt."

"Nonsense," Mahara said. She put an arm around Trea, offering comfort. "You are one of us and under our protection but we must talk now."

Feeling fiercely possessive, Hudson stepped forward and as gently as possible, he drew Chantrea from the queen's side and tucked her against his body, thankful she

didn't protest. He cleared his throat, ignoring the raised eyebrow of his king and made quick work of introductions. Finally he met Titus' eyes.

"She has been through too much."

His king went very still. Intensity burned in his golden gaze. "So possessive, my friend," Titus murmured. "I promise to be gentle."

Against him, Chantrea went still. Though it was against his nature, he stroked her arm in a soothing motion. Nothing was more important in that moment than comforting her. His actions weren't lost upon Mahara and Titus. The couple exchanged quick glances and Hudson knew they would tread cautiously.

The message was clear.

Chantrea Morgan was his mate and no one, man, woman, or beast, would ever hurt her again. Not if he could help it.

Hudson motioned to one of the two leather couches in his living room and once Trea was seated, he sprawled next to her. His king and queen sat opposite them, where Titus leaned forward intently to rest his forearms across his knees. Silence fell until finally, Mahara narrowed those laser blue eyes. "Quit scaring her, Titus. You look like you'd rather attack her than question her."

Titus scowled, then shook his head. "Forgive me," he said. "I promise not to bite but I have so many questions."

Next to him, Trea drew a shaky breath and he sensed the moment she'd gathered her courage. She was a brave little thing.

"First, let me say that I'm sorry I've brought trouble to your door."

Titus waved the apology away. "This is home. It's about time you got used to that idea. We may be solitary creatures by nature but we stick together through the hard times. That has been the key to our survival over these many centuries. I am sorry for your loss, Chantrea."

“Thank you.” Her eyes filled and she blinked rapidly. The ache of empathy he experienced was almost overwhelming. Her pain and grief were like living things and he felt them with unimaginable clarity.

Mahara smiled softly. “They will always be your parents. They live still. In your heart.”

“I knew your folks,” Titus said. “Brant was a good man but stubborn. Years ago, I pleaded with him to stay here with the Turquoise Moon tribe and live among us but he was determined that he and Celia would manage on their own.”

“I’m sorry Dad didn’t listen to you,” Trea whispered. “They might be alive now.”

“I talked with Hudson last night, shortly after your arrival. He filled me in and I need to know more but you need to know that late in the night I dispatched members of our security team. They are now in the process of loading up your family possessions and will be bringing them here.”

“What about my parents?”

Titus’ expression softened. “They will be brought here for burial. I hope that is all right with you.”

Trea nodded. “That’s very kind.”

Titus blew out a breath. “Early this morning, I contacted your brother Max.”

“Max!”

“I hated like hell to deliver this news over the phone. He took the news hard but that was to be expected.” Titus leaned back and Mahara instantly leaned against him. The king sent an arm around his wife’s shoulders. “Maxwell is tough and his first concern was for you. You had a close call.” He glanced at Hudson. “I have assured him you are well cared for. He should be here sometime in the next few days. He must deal with a few things in Houston.”

“Do you think he’ll stay?”

Hudson sensed her need for family, for her brother, and settled his hand over her arm to comfort.

Titus frowned and shook his head. "I honestly don't know. He's as stubborn as your father was but I also believe he can be convinced to stay here and make his home with us. Maybe you can persuade him, hm?"

"I'll try, my king."

"Titus, please. There's no need to be formal. After all, we're your family now and I promise that as long as you are with us, you will be protected." Titus spared Hudson with a sharp glance then smiled slightly. "However, I suspect you have the best of all protectors at your side now. You'll have little need for the rest of us. Hudson is my top man in the security division of Declan Technologies, he's a warrior from way back and I trust him with my life and with the lives of those I hold most dear. You will be safe with him."

Hudson felt Trea go still and then a slow smile bloomed on her face. "I think I've figured that out, my ki—Titus." Then she went serious. "What about the house? What will happen to it?"

"Ah that. I'll be taking care of everything within the week," he said. "Technology is a mighty fine tool and I'm pretty good using it for my investigations. Your dad had already quit his job and I suspect had plans to list the cabin with a realtor but never got around to it. For all intents and purposes, it will be abandoned."

"I don't think anyone will suspect a thing." Trea nodded. "We kept to ourselves and the place is small. It will just appear as though we packed up and left."

"My thinking exactly. It will simply appear to any casual observer that your family made arrangements. They have already loaded the bodies of your parents."

A tense silence swept the room. Mahara finally stood and walked over to the small red bag she'd set on the floor. "I took the liberty of packing a few things for you. We look to be about the same size. I've packed some cosmetics, a hair brush, and a few clothes. Nothing fancy."

Trea got up to reach for the bag. "Thanks, Mahara. You don't know how embarrassing it is to have arrived with only the clothes on my back."

"No need to be embarrassed, honey. Really. I'm just glad you got out of there and came to us. Tomorrow, why don't you come to the house for lunch and we'll raid my closet. See if there's anything else you can use until your things get here."

"I couldn't."

Mahara smiled kindly. "Sure you can. Believe me, honey, you need more than those borrowed sweats of Hudson's."

Trea smiled shyly and slanted a gaze at Hudson. "They are a little roomy."

Hudson stood, facing Titus. "There is one detail we haven't discussed. The men who did this, the men who followed Trea here know who she is. They also know *what* she is and I doubt they will stop coming for her. She is too big a prize."

Titus turned to Trea. "Did you recognize them?"

She nodded. "One of them was called Walt and I didn't know him but I sure as hell knew the other man. His name is Tom Hawkins. A local guy, a thug. We went to school together. It was he and this Walt guy who killed Mom and Dad and came after me."

Hudson felt the rage that swept through her. She practically vibrated with it. In an act of solidarity, he put his arm around her and pulled her close. "They'll never get you, Trea. Not as long as there is breath in my body. I promise you that. And if it's the last thing I do, I'll make the bastards pay."

## Chapter Five

“Brought you some coffee. Looks like you could use it.” Rio Santana halted briefly in the doorway of Hudson’s office at Declan Technologies and narrowed his blacker-than-sin eyes before carrying two mugs to his desk and setting them down with a snap. Today might have been like any other workday in the security wing of the giant corporation but they both knew it wasn’t. Rio had just returned from a grisly task and they hadn’t talked in several days. Both security specialists with a background in violence, they were closer than brothers.

Hudson eyed the steam rolling from the dark liquid and then glanced at his friend of more years than he could recall. “Did you make this?”

“Hell no.” Rio sprawled his long, sturdy frame into one of two big, leather chairs that set in front of his chest and stretched out his denim-clad legs. An ever-present scowl graced lips that a woman might call beautiful. The Latino panther was moody and dangerous but possessed of a sharp and surprising wit that was as lethal as the blade he carried in the top of his battered, ostrich cowboy boots. Today he wore his long, black hair tied back at the nape of his neck.

Hudson picked up the cup, inhaled the pungent fragrance and took a sip. “Good thing. Your coffee tastes like piss.” They sat in comfortable silence for a minute or two, old friends who knew each other well, then finally he asked what was uppermost in his mind. “How did it go in east Texas?”

Rio shifted in his chair and stared into the depths of his cup before meeting his eyes. He shrugged. “Loading the contents of the house wasn’t a big deal. After a call from Titus, we went looking for the two men but there was no sign of them. I have a feeling they are hiding out around here somewhere. We’ll find them. Count on it.” Silence fell. “How is your mate? Is she holding up okay?”

Hudson expelled a breath. "She's having a hard time. I took a few days off to watch over her. Our queen has been a daily visitor and today, she finally talked her into heading out to the mall to pick up some things. Most of Trea's things are packed away in cartons and she just hasn't had the energy to dig through everything. So yeah, they are shopping."

"Women and malls. Sounds like a plan. They love those things."

Hudson recalled the way she'd looked this morning in her borrowed clothes and was glad Mahara was taking care of the pesky little detail of clothing and other female whatnots. "I'm just glad she's getting out of the house. They said something about having lunch on the Riverwalk." The Riverwalk was San Antonio's premier tourist destination. The twisting man-made river stretched through an expanse of the historic downtown area like a translucent, green ribbon nestled near The Alamo. Giant cypress trees stretched across the narrow body of water and quaint restaurants and shops lined either side. Colorful barges motored over the river's tranquil surface carrying throngs of tourists, eager to hear of the famous battle for Texas independence.

Rio cleared his throat. "I reckon congratulations are in order, my brother. Are you happy with her?"

Happy? With Chantrea?

What man wouldn't be happy upon finding that his mate was not only beautiful but intelligent? The fact that she was responsive in bed was a definite plus too. With each day that passed, he felt her knew her better but in many ways they were strangers to each other. He hadn't touched her physically since that morning several days ago, believing she needed to reserve her strength for the ordeal to come. Keeping his hands off her was killing him, yet that tiny bit of distance yet to cross would end when she came into her time. Then he would make her his mate in every way. They would be truly one. "She's incredible," he said finally. "She is just getting used to everything that has happened to her and she's faced with a lot of changes but I have to say, she seems to be adapting well."



“Any signs?”

Grunting, Hudson leaned forward in his chair and crossed his forearms on his big, walnut desk. Rio spoke of the time when sexual heat would take her over just before she claimed her animal form. He focused his gaze on Rio. “A few. It won’t be long now. I have a favor, brother.”

“Name it.”

“Will you act as my second when the time comes?”

Silence fell between them then Rio graced him with a rare smile. “I would be honored. Anything I can do to make your path smoother you know I will do it, amigo.”

“It’s not as if we haven’t shared women before, but you know this is different.”

“Solemn. Si. I know, Hudson.” Rio reached across the desk and gripped his hand. “It is a great honor to be your second. I’ll do everything in my power to help with her transition. And gods forbid, should anything ever take you from her, I will protect her with my life. You have my promise.”

“You know I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t trust you more than any man I know.”

“As I trust you, Hudson. Perhaps you should introduce us before the time comes?”

Hudson realized Rio was right and he nodded his consent. “How about next week? Come for dinner and drinks.”

“Done. Name the time and I’ll be there.”

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Mahara Declan had done everything in her power to make her day wonderful. Trea knew that without a doubt and she appreciated it. They’d had a nice girls’ lunch at a Mexican place on the Riverwalk and then they’d done some shopping. Topics of conversation remained on the casual side and she knew Mahara had kept things light purposely. Smart woman, her queen. She hadn’t been shopping in a very long time and considering her unemployed, basically broke state, she hadn’t planned to buy anything but after some argument, Mahara had forced a “loan” on her. The plan was to pay the

money back once she landed a job somewhere. Trea knew Mahara wanted to give her the money outright but Trea hadn't been brought up to take charity.

Charity.

Something she'd never imagined she'd have to grapple with.

She was home now and night had fallen. Along with it came a sense of melancholy she couldn't seem to shake. Hudson had called several hours ago to tell her he was catching up on the work he'd missed and would be late.

Guilt.

Charity and guilt.

She accepted that she was at the mercy of the folks here at the Turquoise Moon compound. Her clothes were borrowed and every luxury provided, along with comfort and protection. Throughout her life she'd been sheltered and protected by her parents. Never once had she managed on her own and this was all beginning to look like a trend. Trea didn't like it one bit.

With a heavy sigh, she wandered into the kitchen and leaning against the doorframe, looked out over Hudson's spacious backyard. It was beautiful. Far different from the rustic wilderness she knew at home. Sadness seeped into her pores threatening her composure but she held on if only by a thread. Tomorrow she would attend services for her parents at the cemetery a short distance from the main house. A part of her had already said goodbye to her parents but that other part? The part that was lost, lonely, and afraid held on to the childish hope that this was all some horrific nightmare from which she would awaken in her own bed to the sounds of her mother cooking breakfast in the kitchen.

From the moment this had unfolded and her life had turned to crap, Hudson had been there. Every moment of every day, he'd been the single constant in her life and now she was left wondering what had happened. After Mahara and Titus' visit, he'd promptly moved into the guest room. Remaining attentive, affectionate even, he refused to lie beside her in bed. There'd been no kisses, no touches, none of the hot

sweat of passion she'd discovered with him on that first night. Of course she was too damn proud to ask him why he'd had such a dramatic turnabout.

Doubts filled her mind as she stared out at the beautiful backyard pool. Eager to shake the cobwebs from her brain, she slid open the glass doors and stepped barefoot onto the patio. Trea trailed her fingers over the edge of a double-wide chaise, taking in the patio furniture along with a tile-topped table big enough to seat at least six people. A cast-iron barbecue grill occupied a spot nearby. There was no typical backyard fence and she realized it was all a part of the sense of family Titus Declan had built for his people. Privacy but protection. No other homes could be seen but she knew they were out there, filled with panther shifter families who only wanted to live in peace.

Four giant pillars separated the edge of the covered patio from the decking of the pool. Trea leaned against one, absorbing its coolness against the heat of her bare arm. Her body temp was hotter than usual and in deference to that, she wore a light, stretchy tank top along with her most comfy jersey shorts. A cool evening breeze blew across her body and she inhaled deeply the scents of the countryside. The water in the pool caught the lights of stars hanging overhead.

Beautiful.

Despite everything she felt at home here and wondered why her father had been so determined to stay away. Stubbornness, she supposed. He'd always been a stubborn man. A smile of remembrance lifted her lips but then she went still at a familiar coughing sound. The panther was black, slinking from the perimeter of the shadows. He approached the edge of the pool, circling to the deep end, a picture of muscular grace that fairly stole her breath. Trea sucked in a breath, held it, and then he looked at her. Hudson's distinctive, ever-appealing scent filled her head. She would forever recognize him that way but then he pierced her with a glance from pale blue eyes and her knees went weak. His strength called to her. His power and magnetism compelled her to go to him but she couldn't. Frozen in that moment, she watched as he growled low, his fangs flashing white in the darkness.

In the next instant he stretched, the very image of lethal grace, as his body morphed into the image of the man who'd made such savage love to her just a few, short nights ago. He crouched at the pool's edge, his gaze connected with hers, seconds before he stood to his full height. Hudson dived seamlessly into the pool then surfaced to stand waist-deep in the water. He shoved back his wet hair and held out his hand.

"Join me."

Trea shook herself free of the stunning image of him, shaking her head as she moved to the edge of the pool. "I don't have a suit."

Hudson flashed a wicked grin. "Not a problem."

As of a few days ago, only her mother had seen her naked but Hudson was her man, her mate. She wasn't going to be a silly cow about this. Nudity was common among her people but *her* nudity? That was something else altogether. Nope. Time to be brave. Mustering her courage, she sucked in a breath, grabbed the hem of her tank top and pulled it over her head. Upon connecting with the cool, evening air, her nipples tightened.

Hudson's eyes were on her like a wicked caress making her belly tighten in reaction. Not giving herself time to think, she stepped out of her shorts and panties. Bravely, she faced him trying desperately to ignore the heat that prickled over her flesh. A pulse throbbed in her pussy and the need to tighten her thighs fairly overwhelmed her. Tension raced over her along with a healthy dose of sudden modesty. Did she look needy? Desperate? Gods!

"Come to me, Trea."

The dark demand shot through her veins like an aphrodisiac. Gingerly she stepped closer to the edge and before she could chicken out she slid into the warm water. Instantly his hard body pressed her into the side of the pool as he took her mouth with a voracious hunger. His tongue swept the moist heat of her mouth and without thinking, she responded, entranced. Hudson's firm, muscular chest teased the hard tips of her breasts making her ache to press closer. His thigh insinuated itself between hers

to press against the melting heat of her pussy. Unable to resist she moved against it, gasping his name as her body responded. Fire swept through her veins threatening to take her under and her clit throbbed as it pressed and rubbed against his hot flesh.

Then sanity returned in a rush.

Gathering her resolve, she broke the kiss and turning her head from him, pushed feebly at his shoulders. "Hey! Not fair. I have a bone to pick with you, buddy."

Hudson drew back and blinked.

"Don't give me that look," she continued giving him what she hoped was her fiercest glare. "You ignore me for days. Move into the guest room and blow me off. I'm all alone here, Hudson. You say I'm your mate—"

"You are."

"Shh. I mean it. Let me talk for once." Hudson's lips turned up but she ignored that. Why was he grinning at her? Trea sighed. "I don't like all these mixed signals, Hudson. I might have been sheltered my entire life but I'm not a pushover either. I want a man who says what he means and means what he says. You, my man, are just wishy-washy."

His eyebrows went up. Hudson crossed his arms over his chest. "Wishy-washy?"

"Yes. You are." Once her initial outrage was spent, confusion took its place. "Look. I'm just floundering here. One minute you are holding me, kissing me. We had hot, wild, monkey sex and then nothing. It was my first time, Hudson. Tell me the truth here. Do you even want me?"

Forcing herself to meet his astonished gaze was the *hardest* thing. Why had she blurted everything out this way? Dummy.

Hudson took her shoulders in a strong grip and leaned down until he was practically nose to nose with her. "Do you have any fucking idea how hard it has been to keep my hands off you? Do you have a freakin' clue how badly I want to fuck you

night and day, 24/7? Hm? Even now, I want to turn you around, bend you over and fuck you like a crazy man.”

Stunned, she could only blink at him.

Hudson wasn't finished. Not by a long shot. Releasing her abruptly, he shoved his fingers through his damp hair. Shadows edged his features, and again, Trea sensed the aura of danger that emanated from this man. A muscle worked in his jaw as he looked away. “I've been trying for days to stay away from you.”

“Why?”

A tense moment fell and then he faced her, his eyes narrowed. “I screwed up.”

“How? I don't understand.”

“That first night. Hell, you were shattered by everything that had happened. Grieving. I shouldn't have fucked you. It wasn't well done of me.”

She laid a hand on his chest and felt him flinch as if she'd struck him. “No. That's not true.”

“It started out as comfort. I'll admit that but damn it, I was selfish. I took advantage of you when you were low. It was the best sex I've ever had in my life but it was wrong.”

Trea's heart thumped. She smiled, instant sympathy taking her over. “It was the best sex I've ever had too.”

He laughed, a short bark of sound. “Your *only* sex, honey.”

Gathering her courage, she moved close enough to feel the heat of his body wrap her up. “I needed you, Hudson and you gave me what I craved in that moment. It was comfort but more. Does that make sense? How could I hold that against you?”

“I was an ass. It was wrong.”

“How could it be wrong if I asked for it, wanted it? Yes, it all happened fast but that's life, isn't it?” To emphasize her point, she pressed tiny kisses over his chest and

along his neck and jaw. His arms went around her as a heavy breath left his lungs. He settled his mouth on the top of her head.

“Aw, honey. I still say it was wrong of me but I figure this won’t be the last time I’ll fuck up where you are concerned.”

Trea lifted her head and grinned up at him. “I figure you’re right about that. Guess I’ll just have to deal, huh?”

Hudson kissed her forehead and then the tip of her nose. “I moved into the guest room to put some distance between us. I want you so badly I can almost taste it but rushing you isn’t an option. Your comfort, your needs have to come first. You have a long battle coming in the next few days and weeks and the change is a violent one. I want you to preserve your strength. Tomorrow we bury your parents. It’s going to be hard for you. I just want you to know I can be thoughtful. It’s killing me but I can be considerate.”

Emotion churned heavily through her mind, catching up her heart along the way. His concern for her was evident and she sensed that Hudson wasn’t a man given to lies or half-truths. He was concerned for her and didn’t want to be pushy. Though it would be simple for him, considering his size and strength, to simply take what he wanted, he refused to do that. To him, she was a priority. Moved, she stroked his heavily muscled arm then finally settled her palm against his face. “I’m not a china doll, Hudson,” she whispered. “I might seem helpless considering what you know of me but I’m tougher than you think. Yes, I was grieving that first night and more tired than I can say but I could have told you to stop. You would have respected that. The thing is, I didn’t say *no* for a reason. I wanted you and, more than that, I *needed* you too.”

Hudson took her hand and kissed her fingers. His eyes closed. “It seems we have a lot to learn about each other,” he murmured.

“I think we have time, don’t you? Lots of time.”

Intimacy lay heavy around them and for a second there she’d almost forgotten where they were. Hudson’s eyes swept her body. She shivered in response.

“Come,” he said, leading her through the pool into the shallow end. In her wildest dreams she never imagined stepping naked from a warm pool with a hot man but oddly, it didn’t bother her. Together they moved, dripping, onto the patio and Hudson released her long enough to fetch two big towels from some shelves nestled along one wall. Casually, he tossed one onto the foot of the enormous chaise then turned to her holding the other in one, big fist. His gaze lowered down the front of her naked body then back up again sending a responsive shiver through her. Trea swallowed hard and unable to resist, looked down the length of his body. His casual stance was a total lie. Hudson’s stiff cock stretched upward from his groin, his heavy balls drawn up tightly beneath.

Entranced.

Trea was so entranced by the look of him that she forgot her own discomfort, her own nakedness. Unable to resist, she reached out to grip his cock. The long, thick stalk was damp but warm. Hot even. Watching his eyes slam shut, she realized her power over him.

His reaction prompted her to exploration as she slid her hand down to capture his heavy balls with her fingers. Hudson sucked in a breath and then a low moan broke free as she fondled him, stroked and touched. She fisted her other hand around his heavy erection, dragging it repeatedly over the burning hot flesh. Sliding up over the thick head, then drew her thumb lazily over the crown to gather up a tiny drop of moisture at the very end.

Hudson’s big body trembled.

Emboldened, she traced seductive circles there while maintaining a teasing hold on his balls. Her mouth watered for a taste of him as his scent filled her head and her memories took her back to that first night with him. Overcome by the whip of power that swept through her, Trea pressed open-mouthed kisses to his chest, licking and sucking that firm flesh. Deep within Hudson’s body a low growl gathered and then burst through the heavy night air. Inwardly she smiled then gently scraped one nipple



with her teeth. Her gums tingled, another indication that her time was fast approaching. Deep inside her body, the warmth of fur, her beast, stretched, eager to break free. Her pussy throbbed, needing to be filled by this man who took such tender care of her. Trea's inner thighs dampened as her body catapulted into readiness. She wanted him there, deep inside her, thrusting, pounding. Savage pleasure swept her along with need.

Making another feral sound, Hudson dropped the towel he held and thrust his fingers through her hair, his grip on her scalp, firm. "You're dry, I think."

"Uh-uh. Wet. I'm wet, Hudson," she whispered. "Gods, I love touching you. Can I taste you?" She looked up, saw the intensity burning in his eyes and knew his need matched her own.

"You're killin' me."

She smiled. "Can't have that now, can we?"

When had this contrary little streak of bravado been born? Maybe it was born during their first meeting when Hudson had pinned her to the forest floor and told her she made him hungry. It could have happened when he fucked her that first night and took away, for just awhile, her pain. Didn't matter now. She wanted what she wanted and wasn't about to hold back now.

Hudson slid his fingers from her hair to trace her neck and shoulders. A shiver shook her but then he wrapped her up in the heat of his arms drawing her against his body. Reaching between them, he gently removed her hands from his cock. "Let's save this for later, sweetheart," he murmured. "I'm ready to go off like a rocket and, I don't know about you but I want this to last." His hands found her ass and when he manipulated her, squeezing gently, it was her turn to almost lose it. She sucked in a sharp breath, her head dropping back like a broken flower stem as his cock rubbed evocatively over her drenched pussy. She needed him now. Needed him deep.

He dipped his fingers into her vaginal opening. "Gods, you're wet, so wet. I love this." Pumping once, twice, and then adding another finger was almost her undoing but then she didn't have time to think about it at all because he lifted her up. Before she

could take another breath she was flat on her back against the cushiony softness of the chaise. "My turn."

Grabbing behind her knees, he dragged her to the foot of the chaise and spread her open. After settling one of her feet and then the other on the ground on either side of the chaise, Hudson went to his knees between her legs, holding her steady as his mouth skimmed her inner thighs. Strong fingers dug into the flesh of her ass, flexing strongly, the action dragging a moan from her throat. Hudson bent his head, his breath whipping hot over her sensitive flesh and she wished he'd hurry, kiss higher, lick harder. And then he did, sinking his teeth gently into the soft skin he'd found, he swept out his tongue to further torment.

"More," she breathed. "More." The sound Hudson made was impatient, fraught with tension, as he moved higher, finally giving her what she wanted. Cruising his lips over her throbbing flesh, he plied open her labia with his fingers before sliding them over her with wicked intent. When his tongue probed her entrance, Trea caught her breath, held it, then let it out in a soft rush of sound as he plunged his tongue deep into her needy channel. "Gods. Gods."

Sending her fingers into his thick hair she held on for the ride as he thrust teasingly, pulling away only to drag his tongue over her slowly, tauntingly. He had yet to touch her clit and Trea thought she'd go nuts waiting for it. Waiting. Waiting. The man was going to kill her. Then she sucked in a breath as he pulled the morsel into his mouth. Sucking softly, he plunged two fingers, then three into her clasping sheath. Gently he pulled, sucked and drew on her hyper-sensitive flesh until every muscle in her core drew tight, tighter. Trea pulled in a breath and held it knowing her body had reached crisis point. A scream built low in her throat as her heart thudded in time to Hudson's seductive tugs at her clit.

Trea's eyes flew open to stare at the wide, night sky, focusing on the stars and what this man did to her. Unimaginable pleasure caught her up then threatened to pull her

under as he held her, quivering, on the razor's edge. A low hum swept from his mouth to bathe her trembling flesh and finally the scream rushed out, hoarse and long.

Hudson kept his mouth there, gentling her for long moments before building the pleasure again.

Again?

Gods!

Her mate let loose a low growl and practically crawled up her body to take her mouth in a savage kiss. More of a claiming, really.

"I'm done with waiting for you. I'm just not into torture, sweetheart. No more. I'm finished with this bullshit."

Before she could blink, much less catch her breath, Hudson reared up enough to flip her to her belly. His big hands found her hips and lifting her to her knees, clasped her hands and folded them over the heavy wooden frame at the top of the chaise. "Hold on tight," he whispered in her ear. "Let's see how much power you can take. I'm going to fuck you, Trea. Are you ready for me?"

Trea nodded weakly but Hudson didn't really expect an answer from her and she knew it. Hudson kneeled behind her and had gone so very still, so awfully quiet but she didn't speak. Instead she closed her eyes and gripped the warm wood tightly. She felt his fingers breach the folds of her drenched pussy spreading her wetness everywhere. His fangs nipped the globes of her ass and then finally she noted the prodding of her vaginal entrance by the heavy head of his cock. Hudson gripped her butt cheeks and pressed, just a little.

Not enough.

"Hudson."

"Shh. Let me."

"Now Hudson."

“Will you take power from me? It’s close to your time, honey, but I want to test things.”

“Yes,” she whispered in a voice gone rough with desire. “Yes. Give it to me.”

Groaning low, the sound mingling with a feral growl that vibrated through his chest, he plunged his cock deep. Along with his claiming came a thrust of power that sizzled faster than chained lightning through her core then higher and higher. The ever swirling sensation of heat electrified her senses and vaguely Trea realized the screams that filled the air were hers.

Pounding, thrusting, he stuffed her pussy to the point she wondered where he stopped and she began. Pistoning harder, faster, Hudson fucked her mindless. Ecstasy blanked out every other thought in her mind. His hands found her hard nipples and swept the trembling flesh of her belly. He strummed her clit with busy fingers, plucking and pulling until colored lights flashed, nearly blinding her. Drowning in sensation, her body seized once more as she flew apart only to be reborn again. Hudson’s cries joined her own and then her world went black as the pleasure became too much to bear.

Trea opened her eyes, her body wrecked, to see Hudson’s face. At once she realized he’d carried her to his bed where she now lay in the circle of his arms.

He was frowning at her.

“Hudson?”

“Did I hurt you?”

She managed to shake her head, realizing he was simply concerned. Quick to reassure him, she lifted her hand and trailed one finger over his bottom lip. “No. No, Hudson. It was amazing,” she managed, surprised by the weakness in her voice.

Relief swept his features and then her mate lowered his mouth to hers, pressing a gentle kiss to her lips. “Good. I’d rather die than hurt you.”

“Hurt me? Never.”

His smile was slow and the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. "Sleep now, love. I'll be here in the morning."

## **Chapter Six**

Sometime near dusk on the next day, Hudson stood with Trea on a quiet knoll overlooking the cemetery where generations of their people had been laid to rest. She'd been unnaturally quiet since their arrival but considering they were here to honor the lives of her parents, he wasn't surprised. Squeezing her hand, offering what bit of comfort he could, he glanced down, giving her a nod of encouragement, when she returned the small gesture. Tonight she wore a borrowed black dress and had pulled her pretty blonde curls back into some kind of knot thing at the nape of her neck and despite the circumstances that had brought them all here, he thought she was the prettiest thing he'd ever seen. A quick gust of wind caught a contrary curl and pulled it free where it whipped playfully around the contours of her face.

Once night officially fell, Titus would speak a few words but now the group of fifty odd mourners was left to talk quietly together. Hudson, of course, knew them all but he didn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure Trea would be more than a little uncomfortable among these panthers who were, as of now, strangers to her. As with all cat shifters, it was their nature to be solitary and it had been the pattern of her life, up to this point, to cling only to her small family. Things were changing for her in a hurry and Hudson planned to help her through it. A sense of fellowship would be a learned deal for her. She'd adjust.

"So many people," she whispered as she sent a nervous gaze over the crowd.

"Good people, honey. Keep that in mind. We're a small community and almost everyone here knew and respected your mom and dad. They are here for more than that though. They have come to offer their support."

"Can you tell me what's going to happen tonight?"

Yet again, he realized how sheltered she'd been. Hudson put his arm around her shoulders and bent to her ear. "Our king will say a few words and then recite the lineage of your parents since the beginnings of our race."

"Long list."

"You've got that right, honey." He sent his hand down the length of her bare arm and felt her shiver despite the heat of the evening. "Then we'll go to the main house where you'll have a chance to meet everyone. Now don't look at me like that. There's nothing to be nervous about."

Trea rolled her eyes. "Yeah, right."

Hudson grinned and started to speak when the roar of a powerful motorcycle engine broke through the muted conversations around them. All talk ceased as a sleek black and chrome Harley barreled up the path leading to the cemetery kicking up a rooster-tail of dust in its wake. The rider wore no helmet, his blond hair caught up in the wind and the motion of the badass bike. He wore black leathers. Hudson instantly knew the identity of the big, brawny man. Beside him Trea gasped, her hands going up to cover her mouth. Tears pooled in her eyes. "Max," she whispered.

Moving away from him as the cycle drew close and finally stopped, Trea took a lurching step forward. Her emotions, ragged and intense, swept through him as well, prompting him to move to help her but some intuitive something made him stop. No doubt she wanted to share a moment with the brother she'd not seen in so long.

Maxwell Morgan got off the bike, quickly surveyed the crowd, his gaze briefly connecting with Hudson's before he focused in on his sister. Features that seemed carved from granite instantly softened as he took Trea in and held out his arms.

"Max!" she cried brokenly, as she sprinted the distance separating them and leapt into his arms.

Trea's face had transformed in that instant of recognition and Hudson felt an uncomfortable tightening in his gut. Max was Trea's brother and there was no need for jealousy but he felt that nasty emotion anyway. What would it be like for her to look at

*him* with such love and devotion? The reality of the lonely decades of his life rolled slowly and achingly through his mind and he sent up a prayer to the gods that one day she might love him, look on him with tenderness and honest emotion.

Getting a grip on his desolate turn of thoughts, he watched brother and sister communicate quietly. He saw Trea rest her head on Max's chest as he stroked her hair and brushed her tears away with his thumb. As a sign of respect, others of the Turquoise Moon tribe glanced away, giving them the privacy they deserved.

But Hudson couldn't do it.

He watched with unabashed fascination and barely contained worry for his mate. Then finally Max looked up, stared him dead in the eye and listened to his sister as she spoke quietly with him. Looking over her shoulder, she gave him a smile that completely melted his heart. So accepting. So, dare he say it, loving. He'd claimed her sexually but not in the manner that really mattered. But that time was coming soon and inwardly he relaxed as he realized she had fully accepted what was to be between them.

Max drew back, took his sister's hand and walked up to greet him just as the sun dipped below the Texas skyline, melting across it like a strip of fire. Titus steadfastly moved to the forefront of the assembled group and the solemn ceremony began.

Later, Hudson stood on the massive patio that connected to the living room of Titus and Mahara's stately home. Moonlight gleamed across the creamy colored marble bouncing color across the bold tones of the elegant patio furnishings. He leaned against a marble railing and looked out over the richly shadowed hills and valleys of the land. Standing next to him, Trea clutched the stem of a wineglass and took a sip of her chardonnay. From a distance came the muted sounds of chatter as the shifter congregation enjoyed the hospitality of their king and queen.

"I doubt I can ever repay the kindness of these people, Hudson," Trea said, her voice soft with emotion. "Sure they knew my parents but they don't know Max and me. The ceremony was beautiful."



Hudson straightened and pulled her against him to press his lips to the top of her head as she leaned against his chest. "Give yourself some time. You've only been here a little while and before long you'll come to see everyone as family. They'll love you."

"Yes, they will," Max said as he stepped onto the patio, Mahara Declan at his side.

"And I'm determined you should get to know a few of the other women, honey," she said, smiling. Mahara walked up, taking Trea's hand and pulled her away from Hudson. "Come on. There are some really nice people I want you to meet."

Helplessly Trea left with Mahara, smiling over her shoulder as she went. "See you in a bit."

When they'd gone, Hudson reached for a couple of long-necked bottles of beer that were icing in a large copper tub on one of the tables. He handed a beer to Max and resumed his position against the railing. Max followed suit, propping his forearms on the polished marble, the beer held loosely in one hand. "I understand from Trea that she has found her mate," he said, his voice gruff.

Hudson cut a glance at him. "Seems so. You okay with that?" It didn't matter if Max approved or not but Hudson didn't want to enter into things with any kind of resentment from Trea's big brother. He was protective of his own sister, Elyse, and wanted no bad feelings considering he'd spend the rest of his life as part of Trea's remaining family.

Max took a drink from his beer then gave him a narrow-eyed look. "Guess I have to be, don't I? Isn't that what each of us hopes for? To find our true mate? You are a lucky man, Hudson. I've been looking for long years and have yet to find my lady. I'd thought by heading to Houston to mingle with the panther tribe in that area that I might eventually find her."

"Hasn't happened yet?"

"Nope." Max straightened, drawing up to his full height of well over six-five. "Don't really care to discuss that now though. I'm happy for you, Hudson. Happy for both of you. Over the years I've heard nothing but good about you and I'm relieved to

know a warrior of your stature is my sister's true mate." A muscle bunched in his jaw and again a steely, hard look appeared in his narrowed eyes. "But I want it said that if you ever fail to protect her or do anything to hurt her, you'll have to answer to me."

Hudson nodded, not in the least offended. "I appreciate your honesty. I have a little sister, too, and believe me any man who hurt her would wind up dead in a hurry. I protect what's mine and from what I know of you, we might just be kindred spirits. I hear you're making quite a name for yourself at the Houston Police Department, Detective Morgan. Homicide?"

"Yeah. Good, honest work and pays the bills."

"Any thoughts of transferring here to San Antonio? If not to police work, I could use a man like you as part of the security force at Declan Technologies."

Max smiled. "You really mean you'd put me to work as a warrior for our people?"

"Is there anything wrong with that?"

Trea's brother shook his head, his expression turning grim, hard, and angry. "No. Not at all. Considering the murder of my parents, I believe more warrior-class panthers are needed."

Hudson clapped one hand on the other man's shoulder. "I couldn't agree more, Max, and for what it's worth nothing would please me more than to dole out some deadly justice to the men who killed your folks. Believe me, once I've seen your sister through her change, we'll hunt them down. Action is called for. And justice."

"You mean vengeance, don't you, Hudson? If that's the case, then count me in." Trea appeared before them, her hands fisted at her side. Bright flags of color rode the blades of her cheekbones.

"Justice, honey," he answered.

Trea shook her head her gaze flashing from him to Max, her lips set in a mutinous scowl. She shrugged. "Vengeance. Justice. Whatever you want to call it I won't rest until Tom Hawkins and that other guy are in the grip of my claws."

Inwardly, Hudson sighed. He walked up to his little hellcat and settled his hands on her shoulders hoping she would relax. Her shoulders remained stiff under his touch. "Sweetie, you don't have claws yet. Remember?"

"Don't patronize me," she snapped. She shrugged off his hands and faced both men square on. "You weren't there when Mom and Dad were gunned down. You didn't hear those monsters laughing about it. And *we're* animals?" She laughed bitterly. "No, they're the animals. There was no regret. No emotion other than pleasure from those two and if you think for one second I'll stay home like a good little girl and wait for the big, bad warriors to deal with them, then you're dead wrong."

Max chuckled softly. "Forgot to tell you, Hudson, that your mate is a bit feisty. Listen up, little sister, and listen good, hunting down these men is too dangerous and you don't know what the hell you're doing."

"Then teach me," she said, her fierce expression wilting under their scrutiny. Hudson's heart tightened with compassion. There was no doubt in his mind that if he'd walked a mile in her shoes, he would share her feelings. But it remained that his priority was *her* safety.

Reaching for her hand, he gently tugged until she was nestled against his side. "You make me proud, Trea. Know that?"

"I do?" The whispered question caused him to tighten his hold.

"Yeah." He settled his cheek against her hair as her soft fragrance filled his head. "This has been an emotional day. What do you say we head home?"

"Hudson's right, Trea. There will be plenty of time in the days and weeks ahead to talk about vengeance and justice. I promise you, we will."

Trea mustered a smile for her brother. "Will you be staying?"

Max nodded. "Yeah, for awhile. Titus and Mahara have offered their hospitality and I'll hang out a bit. I have a hell of a lot to think about."

\* \* \* \* \*

Late the next afternoon, Trea sat curled up with a book from Hudson's collection of spy thrillers and absently thumbed the pages. One glance at the clock sitting on the fireplace mantel told her she'd been staring at the same paragraph for the past thirty minutes. Mentally rolling her eyes, cursing her lack of concentration, she huffed a breath and set the paperback aside. Hudson had done this to her, zapped her concentration until she was a shivering, quivering mass of flesh just waiting for him to claim her again. Yep, she was now a happy addict and Hudson, her mate, was her drug of choice.

Trea closed her eyes, loving the feel of the late afternoon sun bathing her face. Her mind drifted to the hours she'd spent in Hudson's arms after what had been, no doubt, one of the worst days of her life. The day before had been bittersweet, reconnecting with Max after their long separation and sad beyond measure saying goodbye to her folks. But then Hudson, with his strong, quiet ways made things better by taking her into his arms and loving her until little breath was left in her body and her limbs had turned to Jell-O. Once again, she was beginning to believe she'd finally found the place where she belonged. A home. People who might come to love her.

Feeling restless, Trea unwound her legs from the couch and padded barefoot into the kitchen for something cold to drink. Seeing the tea pitcher was empty, she put water on to boil. Soon sweet tea was thrown together, and chilling in the fridge. While all that was going on, she went to work on supper. Hudson had called earlier to say he'd be home early tonight and could she please set out three or four t-bone steaks for supper. Sprinkling seasoning on the meat, she smiled. The man was typical of most panther males and had a very healthy appetite. After wrapping several large baking potatoes in aluminum foil, she tossed them in the oven but paused at hearing the sound of Hudson's truck roaring up the driveway.

She caught her breath as primal hunger swept her body and she suddenly wished she wore something a little nicer than her comfiest shorts and a simple tee shirt.

Trea paused when Hudson opened the door from the garage and stepped into the room.

“Hudson,” she said, her breath catching. Sexual anticipation zipped through her veins. Oh yeah, she was a goner for sure if she couldn’t look at him without creaming her panties. “You’re a little early. I’m just—” When Hudson moved farther into the room, she realized he wasn’t alone so she instantly squelched the idea of running into his arms and climbing up his big body like a spider monkey. “Oh. Hi.”

Hudson’s companion was a huge, dark Latino and from his scent she knew he was also panther. They sure grew their men gorgeous in this neck of the woods. Yum. Yum. Like Hudson, he wore the standard black tee shirt featuring the Declan Technologies crest over the breast pocket. His indigo denim jeans were belted, like Hudson’s, with black hand-tooled leather and a pounded silver western-style buckle featuring the Turquoise Moon Tribe’s symbol of a full moon inlaid with turquoise stone. He carried a fistful of white and yellow gerber daisies and had what looked to be a bottle of wine tucked under one arm.

Belatedly Trea realized she recognized him from her parents’ funeral but had yet to be introduced. Hudson moved to her side, wrapped an arm around her and squeezed her waist gently. “Trea this is my friend, Rio Santana.”

Rio stepped close and taking her hand, pressed his forehead to the back of it in an Old World gesture that wasn’t lost on Trea. She suddenly knew why he was here tonight but stayed silent, waiting for confirmation. When Rio finally looked up and pierced her with his black gaze, her heart thumped. There could be no other reason for the way he’d greeted her or the way he looked at her now. She must’ve looked like a scared little bunny because his expression went gentle. “I didn’t have a chance to talk with you last night but you have my condolences for your loss, little one.”

“Thank you. Did you know them?”

“Si. I knew your father. He was a good man.”

“He was.”

Hudson's hand on her waist was warm and when his fingers flexed, she looked at him.

"Rio will be having dinner with us tonight. I hope that's all right."

"Of course. I just put potatoes in the oven and steaks are ready for the grill." Hoping to keep things light, she grinned at their guest. "I assume you like t-bones?"

"Damn straight." The sexy Latino held out the flowers to her. "For you. And wine." When she took the daisies, he winked and held up a dark green bottle. "I know lots of ladies prefer wine over beer."

Trea laughed. "This lady does. You are so thoughtful."

Rio shrugged. "What can I say? My mama raised me right."

When Hudson stepped away, she felt tension radiate from his body in waves. For the first time, she noted he held the handle of a black bag featuring a gold logo she didn't recognize. He glanced at Rio and then back at her. "I'll put this away in the bedroom and let you two get acquainted. Be right back."

"Sure," she said carefully. She wanted to ask what was in the bag but it wasn't her business so she stayed quiet. "I'll just put these flowers in some water."

After Hudson left the room, she smiled faintly at their guest, more than a little unsure of herself. "These are so pretty." Trea held up the lovely flowers. "Better give 'em a drink, huh?"

Turning away she crossed the kitchen and opening a set of cabinet doors went to her tiptoes as she tried to reach a vase on the top shelf. Suddenly Rio was there and before she could blink, he held the tall glass container out to her. "Allow me."

"Wow, so fast."

His grin flashed white and just a little bit wicked. "I can do things slow too."

"You'd better not be flirting with me, big guy. Hudson might have something to say about that."

Rio turned suddenly serious. He stroked one finger down the side of her cheek, his black eyes intense. "I would never, could never, poach on Hudson's woman. I'd rather be shot dead. He's the best man I know and I owe him my loyalty, along with my friendship. We are closer than brothers."

Flustered, Trea shook her head. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply anything of the sort. I was just teasing."

He smiled then shocked the hell out of her by pressing a quick kiss to her lips. "Come on. Let's see about getting that grill out back fired up. I'm starving."

And just like that the mood was lightened. Several hours later, the three of them sat outside under the bright Texas moonlight, the only other illumination coming from a yellow citronella candle burning atop Hudson's brightly colored tile-topped table. Trea couldn't remember a time in recent weeks when she'd felt so utterly comfortable. Hudson and Rio regaled her with stories of youthful exploits, some humorous and others downright hair-raising. Their history as friends and warriors unfolded for her as the minutes ticked by and though she was beginning to feel closer to Hudson, now she felt she knew him. Knowing your mate was a good thing. The two of them drew her into their tales, answering her questions with an ease that made her feel included, accepted.

Trea took a sip of her wine and smiled as Hudson carefully worked on peeling the label from his longneck bottle of beer with the edge of his thumbnail. Rio set his empty on the table and reached into a small, galvanized bucket to pluck a fresh brew from the ice.

"So you two first met fighting in the Civil War?"

Setting the empty bottle aside, Hudson nodded and reached for her hand. He rubbed his thumb along her palm sending a sexy tingle up her bare arm. "Yep. Damn awful war. We were both cavalry and in the same unit."

"You fought for the South?"

Rio took a swig of his beer. "We're Texans, so yeah. The way I figure it both sides lost. Americans fighting Americans. Terrible thing, *querida*. At least slavery was ended when all was finished."

"And you two were unscathed," she said softly.

Hudson pressed her fingers to his lips. Pleasure whispered over her flesh and her heart squeezed. For such a big, tough man he could be so gentle.

"You have a sweet heart, darlin'," Hudson said. "No wonder your father protected you."

Trea rolled her eyes. "Boy, did he ever."

"Smart man," Rio added. "We believe in protecting our women."

She laughed. "Overprotect, you mean. Hmm. Maybe it's about time some *woman* took care of you big tough guys for a change."

Hudson grinned. "I have a feeling if any woman could, it would be you, darlin'."

Tough? Her? No one in her life had ever applied that word to her but his teasing warmed her to her toes and she had to admit it would be wonderful to come fully into her beast and test her skills. A shiver swept her as a low roll curled through her belly. Heat rose at the touch of fur and the feeling of her cat preparing to make her appearance. Instantly, her panties went wet and her clit pulsed against the silk of her undies. She caught her breath and held it. Beside her Hudson went still and his nostrils flared as she knew he'd caught her scent.

Rio looked down at the table but she caught the tightening of his jaw as a muscle there bunched in reflex.

"I think it's time I told you why Rio is here tonight, my sweetheart."

She already knew. Oh yes, she did. But Trea remained quiet.

Looking between the two warriors, she saw a look pass from one to the other. Hudson took her hand again but then Trea sucked in a breath as Rio reached across the table to take the other.



“Tell me,” she whispered into the sudden silence.

Hudson shook his head. “Sorry. I’m a dumbass. Didn’t mean to make you nervous but with things happening so fast I thought you should meet our *second*. He’s my best friend in the world and he’ll be yours too, if you you’ll let him. I’ve asked him to stay in the guest room until you’ve gone through the change and settled into your beast. I felt it might be a good idea for you to get to know him before everything goes down.”

“I see.” She looked at Hudson and saw the worry in his eyes but jerked when Rio again pressed his lips to her fingers. When he straightened again to look at her, his expression was grim.

“Chantrea, I would lay down my life for Hudson as he would me. I vow now to do the same for you. Please trust that I will never hurt you and if anything should ever happen to your mate, I will provide for and watch over you for as long as you’ll need me. Consider me your protector. When your time comes and the fever burns through your body, I will be there to help Hudson...and you.”

## **Chapter Seven**

Titus Declan leaned back in the chair behind his office desk, a file folder clutched in one fist, and surveyed the group of warriors assembled. A low hum sounded from the desktop computer that rested near Titus' right hand. Hudson was tense, prepared, as he focused on the face of his king. They'd been called to a late-night meeting and though he was anxious to get home to Trea, he realized something was up. Rio sat next to Hudson in one of the two chairs arranged in front of the heavily carved walnut desk. Trea's brother, Max, sat sprawled on a sofa nearby, his dark green eyes narrowed. He was nursing a glass of whiskey. Hudson knew retribution would come swiftly to the two murderers once Maxwell got his hands on the men. The man was fierce and decidedly dangerous.

"Tom Hawkins, the local man whom Trea recognized on the night of the murders, has returned to his job in a welding shop. He is Trea's age and they went to the local high school together but then, we already knew that," Titus began. He frowned at the written report. "A drinker and known around the area as a troublemaker and all-around jackass. His employment record is filled with an assortment of blue collar jobs, none of which he worked at for very long before getting the boot."

"What about the other man?" Hudson asked.

"Walter Creek. He wandered into the area a few years ago, worked odd jobs and is a drinking buddy of our man, Tom."

"Did he head back to east Texas with Hawkins?" This question from Rio.

Titus shook his head. "Nope. He's no longer there. Looks like he lost his job when he and Tom decided to follow Trea to our area. They hung around here looking for several days and good old Walter was fired when he didn't show up for work. From what Kev has learned in his follow-up, he took off."

Kev Andress, who served as a bodyguard to their king, stood leaning against the wall at Titus' back. He nodded. "I've tracked him to Illinois. After getting fired, he moved back to Chicago and is living with family there."

Titus set the file folder atop his desk and leaned forward, propping his elbows on the shiny surface. A heavily carved silver ring set with two turquoise stones, a symbol of his power, flashed on the ring finger of his right hand. "I've contacted the King of the Illinois Panthers and he is putting some men on Walter. They'll track his movements and dispense justice as they see fit."

Maxwell sat up, anger radiating from his big body. As Hudson suspected, that lazy don't-give-a-shit appearance was simply an act. "This isn't their affair. This is Turquoise Moon business."

"Ordinarily, I would agree with you, my friend," Titus said, his voice a low rumble of sound. "Walter Creek isn't the dangerous one here, however. Yes, he must be brought to justice but Tom Hawkins is the problem due to his past with Trea. He is our top priority."

Hudson went on alert. He exchanged a glance with Rio who had gone still. "Explain that."

Kevin answered instead. "From all accounts among the locals, Hawkins had a thing for Trea but she wanted nothing to do with him. Smart girl that one. When she basically ignored the man's advances, he turned ugly. Made brags about what he'd do to her if ever given a chance."

"Fuck!"

"Settle down, Hudson," Titus cautioned. "Let Kev finish."

Kev blew out a breath. "Tom Hawkins was a lot of big talk for the most part but he made it known that he'd get even with her for blowing him off. All of us here know that our panther women aren't allowed to mix with human males. Your parents, Max, made sure she was protected until a mate claimed her. Hawkins, however, wouldn't know this. To him she was simply an uppity bitch who was blowing him off. He's a loud-

mouthed redneck who drinks too much but has a decidedly deadly edge to him. Now that he knows what she is—" Kev shrugged. "It's inevitable that he'll come back for her."

Hudson's blood went cold. The man had to be stopped and Hudson knew it. He also realized that dispensing justice would fall to Maxwell. It was Max's right as the son of the fallen panthers and though Hudson would like nothing better than to *end* Tom Hawkins, his first priority now, and would always be, protecting Trea. She was so near her time he could almost taste it. It practically simmered in the air. Since Rio had moved into the guest room over two weeks ago, Trea had laid beside him in the night, her body temperature elevated to heights that would kill a human. She moved faster. Her senses were sharper. Seeing her through what was to come was more important than any kind of vengeance. At least to him.

"What is your plan, Titus?" he asked. His hands were fisted against the arms of the chair and Hudson forced himself to relax.

Titus sent his gaze over the men then focused on Maxwell. "I want you to head to Chicago to help spearhead the search for Walter Creek. I know you are on family leave from the Houston PD and this should give you plenty of time to find him. Bring him in alive if you can and return him to us."

Maxwell nodded though Hudson could tell he didn't like this one bit.

Titus faced Hudson. "You will take care of Chantrea, my friend, as is your right."

"She is my first and only priority."

The king nodded. "As it should be. Have you named your second?"

"I will serve as second," Rio said, certainty ringing in his voice.

Titus stood. "Well then, you deal with what is to come for your mate and Kev and the other warriors will keep a watch on the woods of Sanctuary. If Tom Hawkins comes creeping around here again, and believe me, he will, we'll be ready for him."

Shortly after the meeting broke up, Hudson got behind the wheel of his truck and looked at Rio who occupied the passenger side. "I get the feeling Max is pretty pissed at being sent off to the Chicago panthers."

Rio's jaw firmed, the dashboard lights casting his face in shadow. "Can you blame him?"

"No, if it were Elyse who was threatened, I'd move heaven and earth to keep her safe and I sure as hell wouldn't want to leave town under orders of my king."

"No you wouldn't."

Hudson shook his head. "Our king is an intelligent man, Rio. He knows what's soon to come down with Trea when the change overtakes her and wants Max as far away as possible. The change is a dangerous proposition and he'll be helpless to do anything but worry."

"Si. I think you're—"

Whatever Rio was going to say was interrupted when Hudson's cell phone buzzed. He grabbed his phone up, worry stealing like a thief through his veins when he saw his home number come up on the screen. "Trea? Honey?"

"H-hurry, Hudson. H-hurry. I feel funny. Please come now."

Fear rocked him at the wrecked sound of her voice. He heard her terror, her confusion and felt it as if it were his own. "On my way, darlin'. Give me five minutes."

Hudson disconnected and stepped on the gas.

\* \* \* \* \*

Restlessness marked Trea's day and most the evening. She'd hoped to spend a few hours just sitting around and chatting with the guys to keep her brain occupied but that wasn't in the cards. Hudson and Rio had been called to a meeting at Titus Declan's place and she was left to her own devices. Her first indication that something was dreadfully wrong happened when she'd been loading several glasses into the dishwasher. One tall glass slipped from her wet, soapy fingers and as it hurdled

straight toward the tile floor, she caught it in one breathless burst of speed. That's when the shaking had begun.

No!

She wasn't ready for this!

Soaking in a hot bath did little to steady her nerves. Random tremors overtook her and the heat of the water only added to her discomfort. When she finally climbed out of the bathwater gone cold, a blast of heat swept her body. Her knees threatened to give way but she caught herself on the rim of the tub just in time to prevent her face-planting onto the hard, tiled floor. Somehow she managed to dry her body. The feel of the cotton towel pressed to her overly sensitive skin was almost unbearable. Then, as she dried her hair, the blow dryer slipped from her grip and she caught it midair just as she'd done with the glass earlier. She was so fast. Her reflexes were more powerful.

As a young girl, she'd been forbidden by her parents to participate in school sports because, despite the fact she hadn't come into her beast, she was ten times stronger and faster than human children. Now she fully realized how very powerful she would be once this whole mating and changin' thing was done.

Gods!

Heat swamped her, galloping along her nerve endings like a million powerful hoofbeats. Her heart thudded and her pulse sped at a frightening pace as sexual hunger, a more powerful lust than she'd even known before, pulsed through her core. Moisture damped her pussy to spread over her inner thighs.

On trembling legs, Trea made it into the living room knowing she was in big, big trouble if Hudson didn't show his face soon. The time was upon her. Oddly, her first instinct was to call for her mom, the single person in her life who could possibly understand what she felt. Silly. Foolish. She'd often heard tales of dying men on the battlefields crying out for their mothers with their last breath and now she understood it.

Crazy.

Even if her mom were here she wouldn't be able to see her through this eclipsing sexual torment. Only her mate could help her. Hudson's image filled her mind and with it came another punch of horrifying, almost painful need.

"Hudson," she whispered on a ragged breath. "Please."

She was such an idiot!

Their psychic connection wasn't yet established, that pathway blocked to her until she'd actually embraced her beast and brought her to full roaring, purring life. Frustration sank wicked claws into her belly as her mind screamed out. Helplessly, she thrust her hands past the waistband of her shorts then slipped them beneath the silky fabric of her pants. Her fingers slid quickly through the hot folds of her pussy, finally thrusting deeply into her channel. In. Out. She flicked her clit with the pad of her thumb, embarrassment riding her hard. Many women might not think anything about such a thing but she was a novice at this shit. What if Hudson and Rio walked through the door and saw her standing in the middle of the living room with her hands in her panties?

A low cry surfaced from her throat as she climaxed at breakneck speed only to find desire bursting up through her body again, this time stronger than before. Like a tsunami wave, it rolled over her and took her under.

Trea collapsed to her knees as they gave way and though she shook like a leaf, she managed to crawl to the coffee table where she'd left the phone. With fingers shiny from her own juices, she gripped it. Her eyes blurred by tears, her breath tearing from her body, she punched in Hudson's number.

Hearing his voice proved another catalyst for the raging, pulsing passion. When she blurted out her demands, then disconnected, she lay panting in the middle of the living room floor. A low roll curled up, then expanded in her belly and she knew it was her beast. Warm fur brushed and stretched deep inside her. The feline was ready to roar but there again was that terrifying prospect of bringing her to life that scared the crud out of Trea. As she lay panting on the floor, she tried for all she was worth to ignore the

rapidly escalating drumming of her blood pounding a tribal beat within her body. Her bones ached as if they were too big to be contained within the human form.

A single lamp shone from an end table and unable to stand the suddenly harsh glare, she slammed her eyes shut.

*Hurry, Hudson, hurry!*

The words became a mantra in her brain and then suddenly she felt the vibrations of boot heels striking the floor, hands on her shoulders lifting her up. She opened her eyes to find the star of her every erotic dream looking down at her, concern etched on his face.

Hudson.

His blue eyes were narrowed on her and she knew she must look a mess but she just couldn't care. "You came," she breathed.

"Hell yes. Rio, take care of the bedroom."

"Got it, *amigo*."

Her mate brushed her hair from her eyes and took her lips in a kiss full of passion and promise. She sank into the hunger of his lips as the force of abnormal lust consumed her again, a fire burning like hell through her. Her clit was swollen like crazy, throbbing against the sopping wet silk of her panties. Needing relief, she thrust her pussy against Hudson's denim-clad thigh and rode it like the swiftest jockey.

"Hang on," he murmured. "Let me—"

"Can't. Can't hang on. Can't stop."

Another powerful climax rocked her as she ground herself against his muscular thigh. When she cried out, his hands went to the hem of her tee shirt and in one swift motion dragged it over her head. Warmth pressed to her back.

Rio.



His warrior's chest rubbed against her bare flesh and Trea felt his hands go to the waistband of her shorts. One swift tug and they, along with the ruined panties, fell around her ankle.

"Step out, *querida*," he instructed.

She was in no position to argue. At her front, Hudson filled his hands with her breasts. Her nipples prodded his palms, so hot she wondered if she might not brand him with the diamond hardness. Instantly his fingers were there, plucking them until, impossibly, they ached even more. "So hard. Gods!"

"Her scent is delicious. You are delicious, Trea," Rio whispered against the length of her neck. His tongue swept out, then nipped the spot in a manner so delicious that cream dripped heavily from her body. He filled his hands with her bare ass as Hudson took her nipples into his hot mouth to suck.

Lost.

She was lost.

Sensation whipped sharp and high only to dip deep into her core where it curled like a striking snake. Rio thrust his fingers into her pussy from his position at her back as Hudson streaked a busy touch over the swollen knot of her clit. He plucked and pulled at her, circling repeatedly and Rio stroked in perfect tandem, sliding his fingers into her pussy slowly at first and then with increasing speed. Tender, overly sensitized tissues sat up and sang as she writhed between the two hot, hard male bodies. Their breath whipped over her flesh, coming fast as their hands got seriously busy. Without thinking, as naturally as daybreak, she lifted one leg over Hudson's hip. The position opened her more fully to whatever they wanted to do.

"Come," Hudson whispered against her breast. "Come for us, honey."

"*Si, querida*. Let go."

Both dark, husky voices penetrated her sensual haze as her body coiled tighter and tighter then finally let go. A wild cry left her lips and when she trembled violently in the aftermath, she fell against Hudson's chest as two pairs of arms held her tightly.

Finally Rio withdrew his fingers from her drenched pussy but Hudson's touch remained light on her throbbing clit. Cool air swept her heated back indicating that Rio had stepped away for a minute. She didn't have time to think of where he was going because Hudson reached out his free hand and lifted her chin. "You are the most beautiful creature I've ever seen. I mean that. You are the perfect mate for me. Relax now, while you can. Let us take care of you."

She wanted to go up on tiptoes to press a sultry kiss on his lush mouth but she never got the chance. Hudson lifted her naked into his arms, reached out to flick off the offending lamp and without another word stalked with her into the master bedroom. Curled up against his chest, she glanced over to see Rio had pulled the heavy bedspread all the way to the foot of the bed. Apparently, he'd stripped quicker than a jackrabbit since he stood naked, watching them as they approached. His black eyes glittered in the shadowy room and what bit of light seeped through the plantation shutters played over his nudity with devastating effect.

Hudson squeezed his arms around her a bit tighter before walking over to the side of the bed, where he settled her among the pillows. The sheets felt cool against her overheated body. A sigh escaped her. When Hudson leaned over, a tender expression on his face, he pressed a kiss to her lips. "Okay?"

"Yeah."

"Good, darlin'. Good. Now you rest for a minute, you hear?"

Too exhausted to speak, she watched him strip out of his clothes and toss them aside. She sent her gaze down the length of his ripped body then up again as Rio stepped into the bathroom. Within seconds she heard water running in the sink but she was so lost in just looking at her mate, she barely noticed. Heat sizzled over her flesh and the deadly kitty cat deep inside her purred.

Within seconds, Hudson sprawled beside her, drawing her close against his belly. His cock pressed her hip causing her to realize that everything prior to this moment had been for her benefit and no one else's. She felt suddenly silly and foolish despite her

inability to control her body's responses. Nothing was in her control. Nothing. Needing to prove she was an unselfish lover and longing, more than anything to touch him, she reached down to take his hard cock in her hand.

"You didn't—"

He placed his hand over hers, briefly closing his eyes. Hudson's thick cock pulsed against her palm. "Rest, honey. Don't worry about me for a second." Suddenly he looked at her and smiled faintly. "Believe me, my time will come. And I suspect it'll be sooner rather than later."

Rio returned and slid into the bed as well, curling up on her free side. He held a damp cloth in one hand. Matter-of-factly, as if he did this every day, he swept the cool fabric over Trea's forehead, her neck, finally circling it across her breasts. "How are you feeling, *querida*?"

"A little tired. A lot nervous."

He pressed a kiss to her lips lingering for a scant second. "Nothing to be nervous about. You have your mate and me to see you through." He looked across her to Hudson. "How long will this last do you think?"

Hudson shrugged. "Not sure. This is all new to me, too. We need to be prepared for a week but I think it varies from female to female. What did your mom tell you, honey?"

Trea cleared her throat, thinking back. "Um, Mom said hers lasted about four days. Finally on the fifth day, she claimed her beast. But I...um...don't think that time is set in stone or anything. To tell you the truth, I have no clue."

"Hell, we'll just manage together. We'll figure it out."

Hudson casually took the cloth from Rio and continued to wipe down her body. Her belly clenched at the feel of the coolness on her skin and then she gasped as he brought the cloth between her thighs and held it there. A low moan left her lips at the delicious feel of all that cold against her hot flesh. She widened her thighs to better feel it all. Instantly Hudson's thigh went over hers, trapping it against the bed. Rio did the

same. He rested his hand, so big and dark, on her belly as Hudson leaned down to capture a taut nipple in his mouth. Instantly pleasure set up a low hum and following the dictates of her body, she arched, pressing her pussy against the cloth Hudson held there.

“You know that you can’t become pregnant from what we will be doing over the next few days. Right?” Hudson gave her nipple another lick then looked at her.

“Yes. I can only get pregnant during a full moon and only after I have claimed my beast.”

Hudson’s face nestled against her throat and she heard the sound of him dragging her scent into his lungs. “Good. I’m glad you aren’t going into this blind, that you know what to expect.”

“I thought I did,” she whispered. Rio’s mouth went to the other nipple to play and she settled a hand on his long hair to hold him there. It felt so good. “Mom said it was the most powerful lust any she-panther could experience but I don’t think I *got it* until now. Oh, Rio, I love that. Don’t stop.”

Both men looked at her, the expressions in their eyes conveying they wouldn’t wish to be anywhere else but here and now, in this bed with her.

Hudson tossed the cloth from the bed to land somewhere on the floor and a breathy moan swept from her mouth as he settled eager fingers over her flesh. His thumb lazily stroked the petals of her pussy, rubbed the tender knot of her clit and again, the heat rose higher, curled tighter.

Pleasure streaked through her core, coiling tightly, a bright burning that began as before. This time it was stronger.

“Feel how hot and slick her pussy is,” Hudson said.

Trea closed her eyes against the tormenting need, instantly feeling other fingers, Rio’s fingers, join Hudson as together they played with her. She writhed between them, ached. Need poured through her like living flame.

“Please,” she whispered, noting vaguely the pleading tone in her voice. Lust swept higher, streaking like lightning. She began to pant as fingers plunged and stroked. Two pairs of lips latched onto eager nipples. “Hudson! Gods!”

Her pussy clenched around fingers that were buried deep, so deep and someone, Hudson she thought, pressed her clit with his thumb. It was enough to send her teetering off into the high cliff into a well of pleasure.

## **Chapter Eight**

“Rio, go to my closet. There’s a black bag sitting on the floor. Bring it over will you?”

As if from a distance, she heard the quietly spoken request. The infamous black bag. Hudson took her mouth, drank her gasping breaths, as she came down from the powerful climax. “You okay?”

He kept asking. She was amazed by how caring he was with her. Thrilled by his gentleness, her heart squeezed and tears glossed the surface of her eyes. “Yes. I’m fine. But it’s coming again, Hudson. I can feel it.”

She shook her head against the pillow. “Can I do this for days and days on end?”

“I’m sorry, darlin’. There’s no help for it. All we can do is try to ease you through it.”

Rio moved to the side of the bed and flipped on the lamp that occupied the end table. Trea watched his eyebrows rise.

“Get the smallest butt plug and the lube, Rio. We have to get her ready.”

A butt plug? Get her ready?

Trea realized she’d been far too sheltered but her body was humming with expectation so she vowed to go with the flow.

Rio reached into the bag, rattled some papers, opened some boxes and withdrew a small, rubbery-looking thing that was oddly shaped a bit like a pacifier. He gave her a single glance before squeezing a clear gel on it and rubbing it around.

“Wha—”

“I’m going to put this inside you, sweetheart,” Hudson whispered into her ear. “I know you’ve never been fucked in the ass but it’s going to happen. I pretty much figure

there won't be an orifice in your body that we won't screw. You ready for that? Both of us? At once?"

The dark image of these two heavily built warriors fucking her blind filled her mind and her body reacted with a jolt. "Yes. I want it. I want it all now."

He made a rough sound and flipped her to her belly before crawling between her thighs and spreading them wide. "Up you come, love." Placing both hands at her hips, he tugged until she was displayed on all fours in the center of the bed. His palms settled on the globes of her ass and lovingly he stroked her there. The touch was firm, evocative and despite the unfamiliarity of it all, she shivered with lust. "Hand me the plug, Rio."

Rio stood near her head and when he handled the plug to Hudson, his cock rose up, thick and hard right in her line of vision. As she'd felt with Hudson that night at the pool, she wanted a taste.

Hudson spoke from behind her as he spread the mounds of her butt open and prodded the shadowy crevice with his fingers. "I know this is virgin territory for you, honey, but I believe you'll like it. Tell me if I hurt you."

He stroked a finger over her, circling her hole and then probing until he'd inserted the tip.

"Full," she whispered.

"Does it hurt?"

"No. Not exactly."

"I'm going to push the plug into place now and I want you to wear it for awhile. That okay with you?"

It was sweet of him to ask but Trea knew she had to trust this man who was her mate. He would never hurt her and she knew that, despite his size and masculine strength, he was gentle. Tender, even. "Uh-huh. Do it. It's okay."

"Hold still now. Damn, you're sweet. Sexy."

The words washed over her like a balm and then Rio traced the length of her back with his hand. "Easy now," he murmured. "You're doing great."

The head of the plug pressed at her opening then slid slowly into place. At first it hurt, felt tight and she started to panic but almost as quickly as the pain arrived, it ended, leaving her with only a feeling of fullness. She imagined being filled by her man's hard cock as she took Rio into her mouth to suck. She imagined their cries and the sense of power and pleasure and felt her pussy cream. Hudson pressed a kiss to her ass then nipped the spot. The sting of his fangs made her gasp. Rio still had the light on but he removed his hand from her back and flipped the switch casting the room into semi darkness.

Still on her hands and knees, she jerked when Hudson pressed his mouth to her pussy. Lapping gently, sucking at random moments, he filled his hands with her ass eating her out until she wanted to scream her pleasure. Rio sat on the bed and plied her nipples with his fingers. He kissed her lips, drinking her cries and then with a low sound broke the connection. Trea wanted him back. Her nipples were hard and achy.

"Rio?"

"Right here." A slender chain dangled from his fingers. "There are two padded nipple clamps on this chain. May I put them on you? Please. I want to play with you while you wear them."

This man did not have to say *please* twice.

She nodded mutely as he attached the clamps to each diamond-hard bud. Trea sucked in a breath at the feeling of pressure on the sensitive tips. Pleasure and a subtle pain tickled along her rapidly heating skin. He tugged the tiny chain that trailed between her breasts and she gasped again. Then he bent low as his lips and tongue found her flesh, circling, prodding, sucking. All the while Hudson ate her pussy and the twin sensations swirled through her as heat poured through her veins like molten gold converging into a ball of tightly wound energy. Her little beast moved in tandem with the throbbing pleasure.



"You have to taste her, Rio. Come." Hudson moved away and before she could blink Rio left her breasts and moved behind her. In a flash of movement, Hudson moved up to the head of the bed and together the two men turned her again until she lay supine on the bed. "I'm going to fuck you while Rio licks your pussy. Your body is dripping with cream and he wants it all."

This time he didn't ask her. He took.

Lifting her a bit, he positioned her, her back to his front and her knees on the mattress on either side of his thighs. "Ride me, darlin'. Take all of my cock now."

All of it? Tall order but she'd done it before. This time her body fairly screamed at her to comply. Hudson held her steady as she rose up, her drenched opening hovering over his head. Reaching between her legs, she gripped the steely hardness of his erection. Swiping her thumb across the broad tip, she gathered up a single drop of cum and swore she heard Hudson growl. At the end of the bed, Rio watched her progress with hungry, glittering eyes. His tongue swept out to dampen his bottom lip, which was full and lush. Trea wanted to taste that lip, sink her teeth gently into it to gather his taste on her tongue.

"Slide down. Fuck me, my sweetheart."

Hudson's low rumble moved her to action as she swept that silky head through the folds of her pussy. He growled low and Trea watched in absolute fascination as Rio fisted his own cock, dragging his hand up and down slowly. Maintaining eye contact with Rio, she slid down on Hudson's penis absorbing the fullness, the heat as he brushed along her sensitized flesh. Trea whimpered. "I feel stuffed. Gods!"

"Damn, that's perfect. Perfect," he whispered as he wrapped his arms around her middle and pulled her tighter against his torso. Quickly he moved her legs, making a rough command. "Stretch your legs out on top of mine."

Trea obeyed and was instantly surprised when Hudson snagged her ankles with his feet and drew her legs open wide. "She's all yours, Rio. Look how wet she is."

"You said it before," Rio answered. "Perfect."

“Taste her.”

While Rio went to his hands and knees to crawl between her legs, Hudson pushed hard into her cunt. Trea cried out at the delicious pressure. More. More. More. He thrust again and she clasped his cock within her as his hands found her nipples. Due to her position, mobility was limited but it didn't matter. The frustration ratcheted things up a notch and Hudson's superior strength took over. Steadily he played with her clamped nipples, gently tugging the chain, fucking her with powerful strokes and then Rio's hot breath swept the sopping flesh of her pussy. His tongue stroked strongly and again Trea cried out. All thought left her mind leaving only the sensations evoked by these two men as Rio sucked her clit and Hudson pushed hard and deep into her body. Sensation whipped through her, blotting out everything but the magic that curled around them.

She teetered on the edge of climax and it was as if Hudson were so in tune with her that he knew. “Hold off, Rio,” he quietly demanded. Rio moved back a bit until only his hot breath bathed her pussy. Trea shivered, poised on the brink, as Hudson lifted her from his cock and turned her. “Ride me now, honey. Hard and fast.”

Eagerly, Trea lowered herself over Hudson's cock loving the freedom of movement, loving the fact she could look down into her mate's eyes and see the passion swimming there. A low-burning energy wound tightly in her belly.

This was new.

If she could see it, she knew it would be shiny, almost luminescent. Sparks seems to shoot like Fourth of July fireworks from its epicenter and she felt each one. Hudson's eyes widened.

“Gods! Trea!” he choked. He thrust upward and the energy ball shimmered and shook. Trea moaned low and moved over him as if possessed by the sparkling light, the powerful surge. Hudson raised up slightly, moving his tongue over her nipples, still held by the clamps. When the head of Rio's cock brushed her cheek, Trea turned her head and ran her tongue over it. Energy vibrated up her throat and through her mouth

and when she finally took him deep, sucked him hard, he made a panther-ish coughing sound. His fangs flashed in the darkness and muscles bunched in the column of his neck. Hudson, jackknifed into her again as her energy arrowed down into her pussy, spreading outward like a cloud of heat. That energy force grabbed his cock and sent pulsing starbursts through the vaginal walls that held him tight.

Increasing the speed of her movements, she took them both, Rio in her mouth and Hudson in her pussy as the swirling orbs burst with warm light. The edges of climax whispered through her and her beast howled deep inside. Rio lost control first, blasting his cum into her mouth. She held him there surrounding him with the glow of her energy. Hudson removed the clamps attached to her nipples as he thrust again. Trea moaned around Rio's throbbing, jerking cock and that simple action ripped a wild groan from his throat. Hudson rammed his cock higher and higher, finally brushing a spot behind her pelvis bone.

A scream tore from her as her body seized. Intense pleasure rolled through her until she shook with it. As if from a great distance, Hudson cried out too as his seed blasted deep and they came together...trembling, lost.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hudson lay back in his oversized tub, Trea draped limply across his chest. Her eyes were closed, shiny drops of water clinging to her lashes. Frothy bubbles teased the tops of her breasts prompting him to tease the things with the tip of one finger. A blast of love whipped through him and his heart tightened painfully. Overwhelmed by sudden, stark emotion, he shoved it deep. Wasn't manly at all, turning to mush over the love of a woman but there it was and he was left wondering if she might be feeling the same. He could only hope. It was a definite plus for one's eternal mate to love him.

Rio sat at the far end of the tub, a thoughtful expression on his face. He held Trea's feet in his lap. A study of concentration, he pressed his thumb upward over the arch of one foot. A soft groan was swiftly followed by a sigh as Trea's eyes fluttered open and she smiled.

"You guys are going to spoil me," she murmured sleepily.

Hudson pressed his mouth to the top of her head. "Suspect I'll live to spoil you. How are you feeling?"

"Gah! You keep asking me. I love you for it but honestly. I'm healthy and strong. Stronger actually, than I'd ever imagined. I'll make it though this change and I have you tough guys to help me."

She made him smile.

Finally, Trea cleared her throat and looked up at him, her bottom lip tucked firmly between her teeth. "Maybe it's not any of my business but I think you guys have done this before."

"What?"

She narrowed her eyes and gave him a girly punch on his chest. "Shared women."

Rio, still wearing that look of intense concentration, murmured. "We have, *querida*. But human woman not female panthers."

"Human women?" Trea sat up straighter, the movement pressing her hip more firmly against his erect cock but he ignored it in the face of her indignant expression. "I thought humans were off-limits."

"To women," Rio answered matter-of-factly. "Here we have different rules for men than for women. Women are to be sheltered, protected. Panther males do not have to be so careful."

"Well I *never*! That's just ridiculous. Soooo not fair!"

Hudson had to laugh. Rio jerked at her outburst and blinked. "She is a fiery one, my friend. You will have your hands full with this one."

"Not a problem, Rio, since I happen to like feisty women," Hudson said. "Sweetheart, those days are over for me and you know that. Did you ever once see your father cheat on your mother, notice him looking at other women?"

Trea huffed a breath but relaxed again. Unable to resist touching her, he rubbed across the tips of her breasts with the palm of his hand, smiling slightly when she shivered in response. "No, never," she answered.

"Once we are mated we are completely monogamous but our people have always believed it dangerous to let our females mix with human males. It's too dangerous and the chance of exposure is too great."

"Still doesn't seem fair to me."

He shrugged. "It's our way and honey, once you've accepted your beast and Rio is gone, you can damn well believe I'll never, ever again share you with another man. You know how the ceremony works."

"I'm not talking about the ceremony, Hudson, I'm talking about this big double standard. This is America, you know."

"Settle down, darlin'. We're not going to change anything tonight, are we?" He tried to soothe her. Getting herself all worked up over long-held tribal mores was not only futile but dangerous to her. She needed to rest before the next wave hit her. It was sure to be worse than what she'd gone through tonight. He'd always been protective of those he loved but with Trea those feelings were intensified tenfold.

"I guess not." Trea stifled a yawn, the fight drifting away in the face of her weariness. "Sorry to wimp out on the argument but I'm so tired."

Hudson cuddled her close. "I reckon you are. Rest now."

Rio stood in the bath and looked down at the two of them. His mood was distant and Hudson wondered what the hell was eating him. Stepping from the tub, he reached for a towel.

"Where ya going, Rio?" Trea asked. "You've fixed up such a nice bath for us, bubbles and everything. Please don't go."

Rio's gaze flickered toward him and then he wrapped the towel around his hips and leaned over. Smiling he pressed a kiss to Trea's lips. "Figured I'd leave you two

alone for awhile. He needs to tuck you in nice and tight and I thought I'd head outside to take advantage of the pool. Maybe take a run."

"You go on, Rio," Hudson said. "We'll be okay for awhile."

Hudson watched him leave, then turned his attention to his mate. "Alone at last."

Trea stretched up, pressing a kiss to his lips and his heart turned over. Her green eyes were lambent, almost dreamy, and he returned her kiss, taking the tasting deeper. She wasn't ready for more sex now and he knew it. Yes, shifters healed quickly but he didn't want to take chances. There would be plenty of sex in their near future and right now her need to rest came first.

In a minute or two, he helped her from the tub, dried her carefully and tucked her into bed. He noticed that Rio had put fresh sheets on the bed and realized now, more than ever, that he'd chosen wisely when he asked Rio to be his second. "I need to remove the plug, honey," he whispered, leaning over her.

"Okay."

Reaching down, he reached between her ass cheeks and the plug slid out. She would be ready for more as the heat overtook her and he was glad he'd taken care to stretch her properly. He gave her butt a pat then covered her nakedness with a cool sheet. Heading back into the bathroom, he cleaned the plug and tossed the damp towels into a hamper. By the time he returned, Trea was snoring softly, curled into the pillows like a very sexy kitten. Smiling he walked naked through the house and stepped onto the patio.

Rio sat on the edge of the pool, his feet dangling into the water. He held a beer in his hand. Inspired, Hudson went back inside, snagged a brew for himself and then joined his friend. "Thanks for changing the sheets." He took a long pull of the beer. "Hell, thanks for everything."

"No thanks necessary, *amigo*."

"Care to tell me what's eating you?"

“Eating me? Nothing. I’ve just been thinking about what a lucky man you are. Feeling a little jealous, I reckon.” Rio shook his head a little and gazed off in the distance. “We’ve known each other for over two hundred years. I’d begun to believe neither of us would find our mates. I’d hoped.” Rio glanced back at him, his eyes filled with a desolation that Hudson understood very well. “I’m glad for you. You’re a lucky man.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Tom Hawkins walked into the shed that sat behind his single-wide trailer house and gathered up a couple of heavy boxes. He’d just ordered a dozen steel traps from an online hunting outfit and figured they’d work fine for what he had planned. Tom had been able to think of nothing but heading back to the Hill Country to find that Morgan bitch. She was an itch he aimed to scratch and dead or alive, he planned to better his lot in life with this little hunt of his. He wasn’t stupid like everyone thought. Already he figured that once he caught a woman who turned into a panther, he’d be in line to be on all the television shows. Everyone would want to talk with him about how he’d hunted and caught an actual supernatural creature. Shoot! If he played things just right, he’d be famous and maybe make some money out of this deal.

Walt, the dumbass, had lost his job and was too much of a pussy to go after what was left of the family of freaks they’d killed weeks ago. Instead he’d run back to his mommy like a fucking weakling. Finding out the Morgans were shapeshifters had been too much for him. He actually felt *bad* about what they’d done.

Fine. He’d do the work and reap the benefits and Walter could go straight to hell.

Hawkins toted the boxes of traps and loaded them into the back of his truck before heading back into the house for his suitcase. Once he’d locked up to protect his few meager possessions, he got into his truck.

After gassing up, he hit the interstate and headed toward central Texas, straight back to the woods where Trea Morgan had escaped. If he didn’t miss his guess, she was

wandering around there somewhere and he didn't plan to stop looking until he'd ensnared her in one of those steel traps.



## Chapter Nine

Trea's eyes snapped open sometime in the dead of night. Two warm bodies cocooned her but their body heat was almost unbearable, nearly painful. Her skin *hurt* but then she'd been warned about that. A ball of heat wound tightly in her belly and deep in her heart she wanted to cry. She wanted this over.

It wasn't that the sex wasn't magnificent. She wasn't about to lie about that. It's just that it was nearly too much. Hudson's thigh was flung over one of hers and instinctively she turned toward him as the fire in her body started simmering only to blaze and burn. Sexual hunger roared through her belly and pulsed through her cunt like tiny bolts of lightning. Moisture flooded from her core, drenching her thighs as need crawled through her like a ravenous beast.

Opening her mouth over the firm muscles of Hudson's chest she made a low-pitched cry. Tears poured from her eyes.

Instantly Hudson loomed over her, his face a mask of determination. She knew in that moment that she could count on him for anything. He was her mate and would love and protect her until the end of her days.

The tears fell faster.

"Please," she whispered, her voice raw from the savage sensations ravaging her body.

From behind her, Rio stirred and she felt his hands stroking the length of her back. Hudson kissed her quickly then shared a look with Rio. Seconds later, Rio lifted her leg over Hudson's hip and as Hudson found her clit with his fingers and latched onto a nipple, Rio plunged his cock hard and deep from behind her. Trea wailed at the feel of multiple sensations. Hudson made a rough sound around the pulsing stiffness of her aching nipple as behind her Rio increased the thrusts of his heavy cock inside her. Trea

clamped down hard, vaginal walls milking his steely flesh. When Hudson released her nipple, she caught his gaze. "More of you. I need you."

The words had barely left her mouth when he signaled curtly to Rio. Rio withdrew from her body and Hudson flipped her to her belly. Situating himself in the perfect position, he brought her to her elbows as Rio yanked her hips up, wasting no time in impaling her again. Hudson's cock rose up high and hard against his belly and taking it in hand, he held it out to her like a gift he wanted her to unwrap.

"Suck me."

Vibrations rushed through her. It was like the energy force she'd experience earlier but now suddenly strong enough to fairly rattle her teeth. Her gums tingled and saliva pooled in her mouth as she gripped the base of his cock, eager for a taste of him. Rio's constant, nonstop fucking tore through her body, burning her with lust then finally, she swept Hudson's cock with her tongue.

Her tongue felt different. Rougher. Rather than a smooth glide along his heavily veined erection, there was a heaviness to it that was surprising. Hudson speared her hair with his fingers as her mouth took a slow tour of his length. His fingers tightened. "Gods," he breathed.

Eager for a more thorough tasting, she dragged her tongue over his heavy balls several times, loving the way they tightened. Then she moved higher to circle and stroke the thick stalk. She trailed the tip of her tongue around the flanged edge at the head of his cock. Another rough sound from Hudson was all the prompting she needed to swallow him down, taking as much as she could. Alternating what she did, Trea sucked strongly and then more shallowly as Hudson pushed deeper into the cavern of her mouth. A sense of power roared through her.

Rio squeezed the globes of her ass, thrusting deep and hard into her heat, his movements increasing with each passing second. The ball of energy sizzled and swirled through her and both men growled in unison. Her own gums tingled as she absorbed every touch, every stroke and finally she could take no more. Rio reached down to

pluck her swollen clit and then everything coalesced into a single breathtaking moment of pleasure. Hudson held on as she sucked him dry and from behind her Rio went still for a split second before growling his pleasure and shooting his cum deep.

Trea turned her head, nuzzling against his groin, and impulsively scraped her teeth on the tender flesh near the bend of his thigh. She stroked the spot with her tongue. Behind her Rio withdrew from her clasp flesh and tenderly brushed his fingers over her ass.

Sated for the moment and determined to rest while she could, she pressed a kiss to Hudson's belly and rolled away from the two men. "As much as I hate to break up this party, I need a shower. Big-time."

"Sassy woman." Hudson laughed, reared up and swatted her butt.

Faking a bravado she really didn't feel, she grinned at him over her shoulder and then winked at Rio. "Shower. Now. Back soon."

Once she was in the bathroom, she leaned weakly against the door and huffed out a breath. Exhaustion and an overload of sex threatened to bring her to her knees but she couldn't fall apart now.

Gathering her composure as best she could, she stumbled over to the shower and had just turned on the water when she felt a presence behind her. Hudson's scent gave him away. Trea breathed him in as love wrapped around her heart and gave it a squeeze.

"Here, let me help, honey," he said. Frankly she was too damn tired to protest when he moved past her and adjusted the temperature.

"I'm okay. Really."

Hudson stepped back, eyeing her steadily, and then his expression softened. "Tough little cuss aren't you?"

"Hmm. Don't know about that but I try."

"Need any help?"

Trea pressed her lips to the center of his chest. "No, thank you. You are taking such good care of me."

"I'm about to take better care of you."

"Huh?"

Hudson smiled and pointed a finger at her. "Get in the shower. I'll be right back."

Too tired to think about what he was up to, she stepped under the spray and let her head drop back as the warm water sluiced down her body. Trea reached out one arm to steady herself against the shower wall. Suddenly Hudson opened the door and took her elbow. "Come here for just a minute, honey." Gently he pulled her from underneath the spray but the shower was huge and she didn't need to leave the enclosure.

Trea didn't argue but sucked in a breath when he held up another butt plug, this one slightly larger than the last. The end was slick with lube. "Lean against the wall and let me insert this. I'm worried the smaller plug might not have done the trick and I need to make sure you are stretched enough."

Despite a brief flash of embarrassment, she did as he asked and tried to clear her mind. Feeling shy at this point was ridiculous. Still. She sucked in a breath and spread her legs when prompted by her mate. When the plug was seated inside her, she absorbed the feeling of fullness but didn't find it unpleasant in the least. "Good girl." Hudson pulled her upright and pressed a kiss to her damp throat. "Enjoy your shower and then, my lady, you are going to take it easy while you can."

\* \* \* \* \*

Later she emerged from the bathroom to find fresh sheets once again on the bed but where were the guys? Curious, she quickly combed out her damp hair and shrugged into an oversized tee shirt belonging to Hudson. True, she had her own things now but for some reason she preferred his. She padded barefoot through the darkened house stopping at the sliding doors leading to the patio. Rio was in the process of setting a plate of fruit and assorted other things on the patio table. Hudson held the vase of

daisies in one big hand and Trea watched in wonder as he positioned it in the center of the table.

My gods, how did she get so lucky?

Hudson belonged to her, a choice of nature and the choice of her heart. Rio? He was only hers for a short time but she cared so deeply about this wonderful man. She could only wish in her deepest heart that one day he'd find a woman who was deserving of him.

For now?

This was family and she planned to enjoy these moments as if they were her last.

\* \* \* \* \*

Titus Declan lay in his bed, his wife curled against him, but he knew damn good and well she wasn't asleep. They'd both been restless tonight for some reason. Earlier he'd suggested they shift and go for a run in the woods surrounding Sanctuary but in the end, they'd decided against it. He looked down at her sweet face and noted the presence of worry lines between her eyes.

"What's wrong, honey? You're so quiet tonight."

A heavy sigh left her as she reached out to tease his chest with her fingers. "Do you think everything is going okay?"

"You mean with Chantrea?"

"Yes. I can't help it, Titus." She raised up on an elbow and looked at him. "They've been holed up in Hudson's house for days now and I know she is approaching a critical time. What if, despite everything, she doesn't make it? Losing her would break my heart."

Titus pushed her into the pillows and kissed her. "And mine. We have so few females that losing even one is incomprehensible but something tells me she's going to come through like a champ. I knew her folks and they are sturdy stock. So is Chantrea."

She and Hudson will be a great couple and a wonderful addition to our little community. I—”

The phone on the bedside table trilled, jarring them both.

Titus looked at the screen and frowned. “Kev? What’s up?”

“We’ve got a problem, sir.”

“Talk to me.” Titus sat up on the side of the bed, unsurprised when Mahara came to her knees and wrapped her arms around him from behind.

“We’ve been patrolling the woods tonight watching for signs of the hunter who followed Trea here. For days there has been nothing but tonight we caught a human scent.” Kevin paused for a second and Titus easily picked up the sounds of his warriors talking in the background. He could hear the wind whispering through the trees and the sounds of leaves crunching under heavy footsteps. “This particular human scent was all over the bodies of the Morgans. It’s the same one we picked up in the house when we showed up to move the possessions out of the place. There’s no doubt about it. Tom Hawkins is in the area.”

“All right then. Good work. Anything else?”

“Um, yeah. We ran onto some traps. Steel spring-loaded sons of bitches.”

Titus’ blood ran cold. Just imagining his mate stepping on such a thing caused fury to rip through his belly. Hell, their children ran freely through these woods, fearless in the knowledge they were safe here. And now, this man brought destruction among them. Titus vowed he would pay.

“Where?”

“North woods.”

“Fuck. I’m on my way.”

“If I might make a suggestion sir, I would advise you to come in one of the trucks rather than run out here in shifted form. Until we find the all the traps, none of us is safe.”

"I'll find you," Titus said grimly before ending the connection.

Mahara was already off the bed and grabbing clothes from her closet. "I'm coming with you."

"You heard that?"

She turned, jeans in hand, and rolled her eyes. "I'm panther too, my love. My hearing is every bit as good as yours."

He smiled faintly. "Hm. So that's the reason you snuggled so close while I was on the phone."

Mahara walked up and took up a position between his spread thighs. Bending to give him a quick kiss, she then straightened to look him straight in the eye. "You know me so well. Now get dressed. I'm coming with you." Titus stood to tower over her hoping like hell she'd find him intimidating enough to wait for him at home but she simply shook her head. "Don't even try it, buster. I'll stay in the truck though. I promise."

Gods, he loved his mate.

Twenty minutes later he pulled off to the side of a dense trail, spotting the glow of several flashlights. The headlights of his truck cut through the blackness and the foliage. His men were naked, evidence they'd been investigating while in shifted form. Dangerous thing but you couldn't reason with these men when they were on the hunt. They were predators and hunting was what they did best. The human would be no match for them, he thought, once again so very proud to be the leader of such men.

Titus turned off the engine and turned to his wife. "Stay here."

"Okay. Be careful."

"Always." He stepped out of the truck. He'd left his headlights on to add more illumination and walked up to the group of half a dozen men. "Evening gentlemen."

Heads bowed briefly, in the Old World way that was their custom when in the presence of their king but Titus waved it away. "How many traps?"

"Five so far," Kev said as he stepped to the front of the group, a sprung trap dangling from one hand. He shook his head. "One of our females spotted the first trap and alerted her mate. He called me immediately upon getting her to safety. None of us knew what we'd find out here."

"There weren't any earlier signs of the human?"

"None." Kev shook his head as the others branched out over the land in search of more traps. "I figured this redneck would have stink all over him and would be easy to pick up."

"Hm. Maybe he has found a way to disguise his smell. Hunters do it all the time although it's usually pretty easy for us to sniff out the truth, as it were." Titus paced off a step or two then turned back to Kevin. "All right. We'll continue to search. Make sure we have scoured these woods for traps and then tomorrow we'll double our efforts to catch this creep."

Kev's eyes widened. "But sir, you can't be traipsing around out here. What if you stepped in a—"

"I am king! I'm not some ancient elder who has lost his wits."

Kev lowered his eyes in apology and Titus instantly regretted being so sharp. He sighed and walked closer enough to settle his hand on his bodyguard's shoulder. "I'm sorry I snapped," Titus said. "You know the whole 'protect the king at all costs' thing bugs the piss out of me. Just try not to be so overprotective, okay? I want to help."

"All right then. I'll assign someone to stay with Mahara while we look around."

Several hours later Titus returned to find Mahara still under the watchful eye of one of his men. The poor little thing was sound asleep but her eyes shot open the second he closed the door of the truck and started up the engine.

"Are you okay?"

"Of course, sweetheart. Go back to sleep. We'll be home in a minute or two."

"How can I sleep now? What's going on? Did you find more traps?"



He shook his head and focused on a rutted area of the rough path leading home. "No, but we know the man who murdered the Morgans was here and he's obviously after Trea. If he had any idea he'd stumbled upon an entire community of panther shifters, no doubt he would have set more traps."

"That could be good though."

Titus smiled. "Smart woman. Yeah, he believes he's after one lone woman not an entire tribe of us. We'll get him honey. The bonehead will slip up and then we'll have him."

"Can't happen soon enough for me."

He went quiet for a moment. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Call the other women tomorrow, honey. Warn them about what's going on and tell them to keep their children indoors for the time being. Wouldn't want any of the little ones getting hurt."

Mahara shuddered and then her expression went hard. "No we wouldn't and it's not going to happen. Not under our watch. If one of our people gets hurt, especially one of our children, there will be hell to pay for Tom Hawkins."

## **Chapter Ten**

It had been three days. Three long, very critical days where her body had become something that seemed not her own. Aching deliciously, sore in places she didn't know even existed, Trea lay limply on the big bed as a welcome lull in the extreme sexual hunger abated a bit. Once again, Rio stroked her weary body with a cool cloth as Hudson lifted her and held a glass of orange juice to her lips. "Drink, love," he whispered.

Obedying mindlessly, she sipped and managed to swallow as another wave of heat climbed with insidious slowness over her body. Her bones hurt. Her muscles quivered but the need was an ever present, hovering deep in her body reminding her that change was imminent. Mindless lust suddenly rushed her, threatening to carry her under. Her flesh literally moved as the she-cat clawed for release.

Hudson's eyes widened. He brushed a hand over her hot skin.

"I didn't realize it would be like this," he said, watching her muscles bunch and move. "You're going to make it. I promise you."

For the first time since all of this began, he looked afraid and Trea saw it clearly. Swallowing harshly, she reached for his hand hoping to offer comfort. "It'll be okay, Hudson. I'm stronger than I look." A burst of energy rushed her then, stabbing like a thousand tiny pricks bringing a flood of hunger in its wake. Her pussy throbbed and moisture gushed from her body. Instantly Hudson's fingers were there, thrusting slowly in and out until the writhing movements of her body demanded something harder and faster. Rio tossed the spent cloth aside and soundlessly took a nipple into his mouth. Soon that wasn't enough and his lips wandered farther, tasting the tender flesh beneath her breast and over her rib cage.

Too tired to think, too sexually excited to do anything but feel, she arched against Hudson's pumping fingers, claspings them in her eager cunt. Fur brushed deep inside her belly, like an erotic touch, burning her, making her pant. Her gums tingled and as if from a distance she heard a joint pop. Her hip? Her knee?

"Gods! Please!" The whimpered words were her own but she heard them as if from a great distance.

"Rio!" Hudson spoke the name and issued a command she couldn't hear.

Rio moved to his back and the instant Hudson withdrew his fingers from her drenched pussy, he settled her on top of Rio. Immediately, Rio's heavy cock impaled her, thrusting insistently. His balls brushed her tender skin and Trea cried out as orgasm swept her in a flash of fire and lust but it wasn't enough. One orgasm sped into another, each one spiking higher than the next. Lust on crack. Lust on speed dial. How could any female survive the pleasure and pain and live to tell the tale? Her beast roared and the sound broke free from her lips. Hudson grabbed her hips and she felt the release of the second plug as it slid free. He spoke words she couldn't hear over the roaring in her ears but when Hudson dipped his fingers into her anus and gently scissored them, she coughed another panther growl.

Her gums tingled and throbbed and incoherently she cried out as her beast panted out her demands.

She felt Hudson's broad, warm hand settle at the base of her spine going still as he pushed the thick head of his erection slowly past the ring of muscle. Dark pleasure pulsed through her bloodstream, heating and then igniting her as he finally thrust deep. They froze. Hudson's hot breath swept her neck as he bent low over her back. "Love you. Love you. Come now, little cat. You can do it."

His words shook her, breaking through the paralyzing pleasure to settle in her heart. And then he began to move into her body in tandem with the strokes of Rio's cock in her pussy. Energy burned like a vibrant flame, shooting sparks wildly through her body until it seemed to yank raw, savage cries from the men who were loving her.

Above her, Hudson shivered and gasped. Below her, Rio's fangs sprang free as he fucked her.

"Look at me, Trea." Hudson made the rough demand and Trea mindlessly complied. She looked over her shoulder at him and the second their gazes connected, her fangs sprang free. A wild panther cough burst from her throat and she watched in savage delight as Hudson flashed his fangs in response. Her flesh shifted again, from wrist to ankle and every place in between. A fiery blast exploded through her veins as an orgasm shook her again but this time she wasn't alone, Hudson and Rio were with her. In a ritual as old as time Hudson sank his fangs lightly into her shoulder, barely breaking skin, but it caused no pain. The act connected them at the most critical moment of her change.

Fierce ecstasy claimed her. The world swirled crazily on its axis and at the moment of final separation from her lovers, her beast was born.

Hudson sat on the bed and looked at his mate in her panther form. He shared a relieved look with his friend who was somehow plastered against the headboard, looking slightly shell-shocked. Rio managed a smile. "Hell, man."

"She's beautiful," Hudson said, his voice rough with emotion. Trea was small. Yes, they were all larger than typical panthers, but she was smaller than most panther shifters. Her buff-colored coat was thick and luxurious, her eyes a deep green, shining with intelligence. Trea stared unblinkingly at him and flashed her newly minted fangs.

"She is," Rio answered, watching as Hudson reached out to stroke his mate. "Open the path of communication, *amigo*. It's important that you connect immediately with her. At least that's what I've always heard."

Hudson realized this was a unique experience for all of them but might be terrifying for Trea. Standing naked from the bed, he shoved shaky fingers through his hair before concentrating on the shift. With a soft whoosh of sound, he transformed into his huge melanistic panther and leaped onto the bed to join his mate. Rio also shifted.

Like Hudson, he was black with an underlay of the typical buff color nearest to the skin. Hudson couldn't communicate telepathically with Rio. That distinction was special between mates but as if he knew exactly the best course of action, Rio leaped from the bed and padded from the room.

Alone.

Yeah, alone was good.

Concentrating on Trea, focusing intently, he opened the channels in his mind that would connect him to his wife. True mates would always have this connection. It was special, real, an invisible line holding them together. Prodding gently, he communicated with her beast. *Okay? Trea? Answer me, sweetheart.*

*Um. Oh my gods! This is so weird, he heard her whisper.*

*How do you feel?*

*Great. Really. Better than great. I don't think panthers are supposed to cry.*

*Then don't, unless they are happy tears.*

*They are. They are. Oh Hudson, thank you. You did it. You and Rio.*

His laughter swept softly from beast to beast. *Gotta say, darlin', you did a pretty good job yourself. You are beautiful.*

A pause fell between them. *So are you.*

Chantrea leaped from the bed and prowled in a large circle at the foot of the bed. Not wanting a second of separation between them, Hudson followed her, nudging her hip playfully, brushing his muzzle against her heavily muscled neck.

*Want to run? Hell, you've waited long enough for this moment.*

*Yes. Oh yes, let's go.*

Together they moved through the house until they reached the patio doors. Obviously Rio had gone out, leaving the sliding glass open for them. Off in the distance he loped across the fields until he finally disappeared from sight. *Isn't he coming with us?* Trea asked.

Hudson circled her, giving her another gentle nudge. *He's being a gentleman and leaving us alone for awhile. It's a good thing. We'll see him back here later.*

Trea walked to the edge of the pool and looked out over the rolling hills of Sanctuary then looked back at him with unblinking eyes. *Race you.*

Her joyous laughter echoed through his mind and he joined her, chasing her through the night as owls hooted in the branches of the woods that surrounded them. Dove scattered from the trees to sweep the night sky. Trea scared a rabbit from beneath a bush and happily ran after it before becoming distracted by other scurrying sounds. Protectively Hudson watched over her as she explored the world around her, happy to hear her laughter and knowing that he loved her beyond all reason. She was his life and he would do everything possible to keep her safe.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two weeks later, Trea sat with her husband outside near the pool realizing this was a place of comfort for Hudson. For some reason they always ended up out here. Maybe it happened because it placed them close to nature, absorbing the sights and smells of the Texas Hill Country. The scent of grilled chicken hung in the air and the dinner dishes had been carried into the house. Max sat across the table from them having returned the day before from Chicago. He leaned back in his chair taking the glass of whiskey Rio handed to him.

When Rio took the chair next to Max, he exchanged a soft look with her. Since the night of her change, he'd moved into the guest room but was planning to head back to his own place, his own life first thing in the morning.

*I'll miss him,* Trea said to her mate using the cooler-than-heck telepathic connection.

Hudson's arm went around her. *I know, honey. He's a good friend to us. Always will be.*

*Think he'll find someone?*

*Here's hoping. I just know that it's a comfort to me knowing that if anything were to happen to me, he'd –*

*Shh. Don't say it! Not ever.*

His laughter swept softly, like a physical caress, through her mind.

While they'd been having their little private moment, Max and Rio were talking so she brought herself back and listened. "It was the damndest thing," Max said quietly. "I hooked up with several warriors from the Midwest Tribe and we began to stalk bars in the area. Walter Creek likes his booze." He stretched out his long frame, crossing his booted feet at the ankle. "He had a regular haunt so it wasn't hard to sit nearby and listen in on his conversations. Nothing at all was ever mentioned about Trea or the murder of our parents." Max shrugged. "Maybe he thought the story of people who turned into panthers seemed too implausible for the crowd he hung out with. Who knows?"

"And he just disappeared?" Hudson asked.

"Yeah. Weird. We'd planned to grab him when he was alone but normally Creek hung out with groups. One night he didn't show up to meet his drinking buddies. Another panther detail was assigned to watch his mother's house and he just disappeared. Titus called and told me about the traps they'd found here and suggested my time could be better spent here. The Chicago panthers will keep looking for him."

Rio took a sip from his glass. "Titus filled us in on the traps in the area. Altogether, seven traps were found and sprung and thank the gods no one was hurt. The scent of a human is strong in the woods. For what it's worth, I'm glad you're back. We can use all the help we can get in tracking this dude."

Trea didn't want her reunion with her brother marred by this talk of traps and murder. Leaning forward a bit, she smiled at her brother. "Are you staying, Max? What have you decided?" Max was her only remaining family and she didn't realize until now how important his answer would be.

Max glanced from her to Hudson. "I'm turning in my resignation at the Houston PD. Had a long talk with our king before I came over here tonight. He has offered me choice of several plots of land on which to build and the offer of work at Declan Tech."

He looked from Rio to Hudson and back again. "Looks like I'll be working security with you two."

Hudson tipped his beer in Max's direction. "Good news, brother. We can use a man like you. Welcome aboard."

"My problem now is finding a place to stay," Max said. "I don't want to impose on Titus and Mahara."

"You can stay here. With us." Trea thought her smile would crack her face. Having her brother here would be a miracle but then Max shook his head, grinning.

"And impose on a newly mated couple? Hell no! I'm not that big an ass."

"Reconsider," Hudson said flatly. "You'd only be here long enough to build your own place. We'd like having you."

"Thanks but no, Hudson."

Rio leaned forward, propping his elbows on the tile-topped table. "I have an idea. I'll be heading back to my place in the morning. Why don't you bunk with me? I have plenty of room."

Max sat thoughtfully for a moment before finally grinning. "All right, Rio. That sounds like a good plan. Maybe sometime tomorrow you could come with me to scout some locations on which to build. You know the area a lot better than I do."

Rio opened his mouth to speak but suddenly his cell phone rang and conversation halted. Trea watched Hudson's eyes narrow briefly as Rio answered.

"Titus?" Rio paused. A grim expression crossed his face. "Be right there." Another pause as he looked between Hudson and Max. "Yes, yes, they're here." Alarmed, Trea went still. Rio's lips formed a hard line as he listened to Titus. Finally, he nodded. "If you insist. Max and I will be out right away."

When Rio disconnected he looked around the table. "A teenaged boy was caught in another trap. He's hurt but since he has recently gone through his first shift, he's healing fast."



"Fuck!" Hudson went to his feet. "I thought all the kids were told to stay away from the woods!"

"They were. Our teenagers are no different from the human ones. Don't listen to a damn thing."

"Where was he found?"

"South woods. Titus wants Max and me to head out there."

"You aren't going?" Trea asked her mate.

Hudson shook his head. "My place is with you. Tom Hawkins is here and looking for you, sweetheart. He doesn't know about the rest of us or what we're going to do to him should we find him. Yeah, I want to find the bastard and end him for what he has done but you are my first priority."

After giving her brief, hurried hugs, both Max and Rio jogged out to the driveway, climbed in Rio's truck and took off toward the south woods. Trea stood, Hudson at her side, watching dust kick up behind the vehicle as it raced away. Hudson's arm went around her and gladly, she leaned against him, absorbing his strength. It was hard to imagine the pain the boy felt as the trap snapped around his ankle. The agony.

"That poor kid."

"I know," Hudson said. "He'll heal though. That's the main thing. Damn traps."

Together they turned and headed toward the backyard. Anger, a heavy, burning thing, rose up inside her. She wanted this done. Wanted it finished. They'd just reached the deep end of the pool when a familiar voice boomed out at them.

"Gotcha now, you little bitch!"

Trea spun toward Hawkins' voice, noted the rifle in his hands and then a blast shook the air as he fired the weapon. A scream froze in her throat as Hudson's body flew backward. Blood blossomed on his chest as he fell in a crumpled heap near the side of the pool.

"Hudson!"

Her blood froze in her veins as terror clawed through her belly. Braced to run to him, she spared a single glance at Tom Hawkins. He'd broken into a trot, an evil grin on his face but she had to get to Hudson. Was he dead? Gods!

Just as she turned to run, she caught sight of the heavy rifle butt as it swung in her direction. Hawkins was upon her and then there was time for nothing as the wood connected with her head and the world went black.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Hudson lay flat on his back, wincing at the pain in his chest. His first realization was that he was alive and then, the second coming instantly, was that Trea had been taken. Panic blasted through his mind but he was weak, much too weak to open a channel of communication with her. There was nothing but emptiness in his brain. Concentrating on his wounds, he stared briefly into the night sky and then closed his eyes. The bullet had penetrated his lung, cracking two ribs on its journey into his body. That was easy enough to figure out. A few more inches and the gunman would have hit his heart and that would've been the end of him.

Forcing chaos from his mind he focused on the wounds, thankful for the fact he was a two-hundred year old shifter, and among the most powerful of their species. He would heal quickly but not fast enough for his peace of mind. Trea was out there somewhere with a lowlife bastard bent on killing her. The very idea of this monster destroying her bright light left him desolate but he shoved the fear to the back of his mind. No time for it now. He had to heal himself before he could do a damn thing toward getting her safely back.

In the face of the terror he felt, Hudson closed his eyes and focused on the location of the injury. Pain ripped through his body as he forced movement of the bullet and within ten minutes or so the deadly ammo pushed its way through his lungs and to the surface of his skin. Hudson expelled a breath, weakly reaching up to catch the piece of lead with his fingers. Breathing in, out, in, out, he lay perfectly still until he felt the wound begin to close. Once he'd managed to regulate his breath, he cautiously sat up and tried to open the mental path of communication with his mate. Little time had passed since Tom Hawkins had tried to gun him down. That was good. It gave him time to track the bastard. He knew Trea was alive. She had to be. Hudson had no doubt

in his mind that if she'd been murdered, he would know it. Shaking the horrible thought from his head, he concentrated.

*Trea? Answer me. I'm okay. Where are you? Honey, please answer me.* The frantically issued telepathic questions were met with an ominous silence. No, not dead. She couldn't be dead but obviously he'd knocked her out or something. Without hesitation, he got to his feet and ran toward the house plotting possible means of attack. Racing toward the weapons cabinet he kept in his den, he unlocked the doors and withdrew several types of guns and a hunting knife. Most likely he'd come at Hawkins in panther form but it didn't hurt to be prepared for any eventuality. He wasn't a fool. Hawkins was armed, dangerous, and out for blood. Trea's blood.

Wasting no further time, he ran to his truck and pulled out of the driveway as he punched in Rio's number on speed dial. The second Rio answered, he apprised him of the situation knowing Rio, Max and the other shifters would join in the rescue efforts.

Once again, Hudson opened his mind. *Trea! Answer me.*

*Hudson? You're alive? Thank the gods!* He heard her weeping and the sound of it broke his heart but he had to urge caution.

*Don't let him see you cry. Do you hear me?*

*Y-yes. I'm a rock. Tell me how you are.*

*I'm fine. Bullet is gone, missed my heart. Right now I'm just worried about you. Again, honey, don't let on about this conversation to Hawkins. He knows you are a shifter but knows nothing about the rest of it. We don't want to clue him in on that fact.*

*Not stupid.* Hudson heard her snuffle but knew she was desperately trying to hold it together.

He gentled his telepathic voice. *No, you're not, darlin. Are you hurt?*

*Bump on the head knocked me out for awhile but I'm okay now.*

*Where are you?*

There was a pause. *I'm tied up against a tree. In a clearing. He has his truck lights on to light the area. Hudson, he's just sitting here staring at me. I don't think he quite knows what to do with me. A big plus is that he's swigging whiskey from a bottle.*

*He's getting sloshed, huh? That could be a good thing. Tell me what landmarks you see.*

Quiet fell for a second or two and he knew Trea was gathering information from what little she could see beyond the glare of the truck's headlights. *A creek. There's a creek to my left.*

*Good girl. I think I can pinpoint exactly where you are. Hold on. If he decides to talk, oblige him. Talk back. Just keep him preoccupied until I get there.*

*Hudson?*

*Yeah, honey.*

*I can't shift. My hands are tied to a tree. He has ropes tied around my ankles too. Can't move at all.*

*Sit tight, he murmured grimly. I'll be there soon. Be prepared for anything. I'm not afraid of the ass but he's armed. He's dangerous.*

*Hurry, Hudson.*

*On my way.*

Once the connection was broken, he dialed Rio and told him to send the others to the area around Baldy Creek, which ran through Sanctuary property. Stealth was paramount. Rio knew the drill and so did Max. The warriors of the tribe would find him, surround him, give chase and let the chips fall where they may. Hudson didn't give a shit how they brought Tom Hawkins down but caution was important as long as he held a rifle trained on Trea.

Roughly twenty minutes later, his heart pounding at a furious rate, he spotted the glint of headlights near the bank of Baldy Creek. He didn't want to alert Hawkins to his presence so he parked some distance away, shut off the engine. Tucking a pistol into the waistband of his jeans and placing a hunting knife in a sheath attached to his belt, he took off on foot, his preternatural speed eating up the distance.

Peering around a tree near the clearing, he spotted Trea instantly then focused on Hawkins who took a swig of whiskey from a half empty bottle. Hawkins dragged his forearm across his mouth then sneered.

"You always thought you were too good for the likes of me."

"No, no, I—"

"Shut the fuck up, bitch. But you're no better than an animal."

Even in the semi-darkness, Hudson saw rage suffuse her pretty face. "You're the animal. You! You shot my parents down in cold blood."

"Hell, woman! They were panthers. Just animals. But once I figured out what and who they were I wasn't sorry. It's just too bad their bodies disappeared before I could make some money from my discovery."

"Bastard!"

Hawkins laughed. "I have you now though, don't I? Haven't quite figured out how to go about this but I reckon someone would pay me some pretty good money for proof that shapeshifters exist." He stood, stumbling a bit drunkenly. Taking another drink, he tossed the bottle to the ground and pointed a finger at her. Hudson wanted to rip his throat out but remained still, hidden in the shadows. "Tell ya what though, little missy, I wouldn't mind having your pretty head hanging on my wall. Gotta piss."

Yeah, Hawkins was a class act.

Hudson watched him lurch into the darkness and turn his back. He believed himself safe now but he was dead wrong about that.

Making his way quietly to where Trea was trussed up, Hudson opened his connection to her. *I'm here. Don't move. I'm coming behind you and cutting these ropes.*

*Okay.*

*Once I cut them, stay where you are. Don't let him know a damn thing. I'm going to set the knife within easy reach, honey, so you can slice the ropes at your ankles.*

*Got it.*

*Good girl.* Hudson approached Trea from behind, the tree providing cover for him. Quickly he cut through the ropes, reached for her chapped wrists and rubbed gently. Trea didn't move a muscle but her warmth reached out to him. Keeping up the mental connection, he filled her in further. *I'm leaving the knife right here but I don't want you to go for it until I make my appearance.*

*Damn it. Be careful. Don't get yourself killed.*

*Believe me, honey. I'm not the one who's gonna die tonight. Before this is over he'll be wishing he'd hit my heart instead of my lung. Now I'm going to step back a bit and shift. Once I come into the clearing, use the knife to cut yourself free. Then I want you to shift and get the fuck out of here.*

*No! Hudson, I—*

*Do what I say, Trea. No arguments. I can't fight Hawkins and worry about you at the same time.*

*Damn it.*

*We'll take this up later. For now, you will do as I say.*

Hudson stepped farther into the shadows, stripped and within a second or two shifted into his panther. Stalking toward the open clearing he snarled at Tom Hawkins as he moved into the light, still fastening his belt. Hudson growled again as rage, an awful blood lust rushed through his system. Hawkins went still, his eyes widening. Instantly he glanced toward the tree where he'd tied Trea.

She was gone.

The only sign that she'd ever been there, a scrap of rope that lay on the ground.

*Good girl!*

Tom jerked his head and reached slowly down to the ground where he'd dropped his rifle. "You aren't gonna get the best of me, girl. I'll shoot you down just like I shot your folks. You'd better believe it!"

Mistakenly, he believed Hudson was Trea in panther form.

Big mistake.

Hudson slinked closer, hissing at his prey, flashing fangs that were deadlier than any knife. Tom's grip on the rifle was shaky but he managed to lift it anyway. Hudson pounced, a coughing sound tearing from his throat but Hawkins managed to roll away, squealing like a little girl, and the gun hit the ground. Hudson slashed with a deadly claw and a strip tore from Hawkins' tee shirt. Blood welled from the gouge on his back. Still the man managed to get to his feet. Suddenly, wildly, he looked around and Hudson noted the woods were filled with huge panthers. His brothers. A ferocious growl issued from the throat of an enormous buff-colored shifter and Hudson recognized the fury burning in familiar, dark green eyes.

Max.

Next to him, Rio advanced and Max followed suit as over a dozen of his panther brothers stalked the hunter.

Tom Hawkins wasn't a total dumbass after all. Realizing he'd bitten off more than he could chew, he ran toward his truck as the panthers gave chase. Several leaped onto the hood of the truck, others clawed at the metal of the passenger door as Hawkins drove away. Not about to let the man off this easily, Hudson chased after the truck along with his brothers. Hawkins gunned the engine, driving crazily in his panic to get away. Suddenly a tire hit a deep gouge in the path and Hawkins, overcorrecting, yanked the steering wheel and the truck plowed headfirst into a massive oak at high speed. Steam poured from the crushed engine of the ruined truck.

Instantly Hudson shifted back into his human form and cautiously approached. Others shifted too though several maintained their panther forms. Rio and Max joined him just as he reached the cab. Hawkins was slumped back against the seat, his head angled in a freakish position.

His eyes were open but he couldn't see a thing.

"He's dead, isn't he?"



Hudson jerked and looked over his shoulder to see his mate moving into the circle of shifters. She'd obviously dressed hastily after shifting to get away from Hawkins. Hudson knew it because her tee shirt was on inside out and she was still barefoot. A blast of hot, summer air caught her curls, whipping them around her face. To him, she'd never looked more beautiful. "Yeah. He's gone, honey." Hudson walked up to her, pulled her into his arms and held her close. "He'll never hurt anyone again."

"And justice is served."

"Yeah. It is. Let's go home."

\* \* \* \* \*

Trea snuggled into Hudson's arms loving the feel of his strength, his warmth, curling around her like the comfiest blanket. Two days had passed since Tom Hawkins plowed into a tree and paid with his life for the crimes he'd committed against her and her parents. Explaining the death had been easy. Titus has simply called the sheriff's department and reported that a poacher had come onto the land, set illegal traps, gotten drunk and died in an accident. The autopsy revealed alcohol in his system so no further questions had been asked. Sure, Walter Creek was still out there somewhere but it was commonly believed the man wasn't an imminent threat. Who would believe such a thing as panther shifters and paranormal creatures, in the first place? But if he ever showed up in Texas again, they would deal with him.

"What are you thinking?" Hudson murmured against her hair. His breath was warm and comforting. Trea burrowed closer and sighed.

"Just that I'm glad this is over. I want some 'normal', ya know?"

Her mate laughed softly, then moved until he lay almost belly to belly with her, his thigh draped across her body. "Normal? With you? Honey, I don't think that's possible. I swear you are the feistiest woman. I'm gonna have my hands full dealing with you."

To prove his point, he filled his hand with her breast, thumbing the nipple until it hardened like a gem against his fingers. A low breath left her lungs and feeling playful

and happier than she'd ever been before, she nipped his bottom lip following the action with a swipe of her tongue. "Hmm. Looks like your hands are already full, dude."

"Plan to keep 'em full too."

Hudson lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her deeply. Trea fell into the kiss as a low fire flickered in her belly. But then a thought occurred to her. She broke the kiss. Hudson's blue eyes widened marginally.

"Trea?"

Forcing herself to be brave she looked at him unflinchingly. "Have to ask you something."

"Ask away."

"That night. The night of my first shift you said you loved me."

Hudson went still. Had he meant it or were they words spoken hastily during the fires of lust? She knew he wasn't a frivolous man but, damn it, she had to know.

His smile turned gentle and he studied her face as if memorizing every line. "And you wonder if I meant it? You know better, my darlin'. I'm a man who means what he says and how could I not love you? I've been alone for a long, long time, honey. I'd almost given up, you know. Figured I was doomed to spend the rest of my wicked life alone. But then you came running through the woods and practically fell into my arms. It was fate. Kismet. Hell, whatever you want to call it. You're mine, honey. Forever."

Tears swept the surface of her eyes, dampening her lashes. Hudson's gaze was tender, his touch sweet, as he gathered the drops on his thumb.

"I love you, too," she choked out. "I've been so lonely for most of my life. You saved me and gave me something good to hang onto, Hudson. I never want to be without you. Not ever."

And as he kissed her again, building the fires in her body to feverish heights, he entered her, loved her and held her close. "Honey, believe me, you won't have to. I'm here with you, in your arms, and I'm staying put."

## **About the Author**

Regina Carlisle is an award-winning, multi-published author. She likes writing that is hot, edgy and often humorous, and puts this trademark stamp on all her stories. Regina lives in west Texas with her husband of 25 years and counting, and is a doting, fawning, over-indulgent mother to her two kids. When she's not penning steamy erotic tales or hot contemporary stories, she's indulging in long chats with friends who help her stay sane and keep her laughing.

Regina welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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