

The logo for Samhain, featuring a stylized tree or plant icon above the word "SAMHAIN" in a serif font.

SAMHAIN

SERENGETI SUNRISE

VIVI ANDREWS

No strings? Try hopelessly tangled.

Serengeti Shifters, Book 4

Zoe King is itching to get out of Three Rocks. Sure, the pride is more progressive with her brother in charge. She's just got a bad case of wanderlust...and an even worse case of the hots for Tyler Minor.

The pride's mechanic sets her senses on fire one second, then shuts down and walks away the next. Before she hits the road for good, this lioness decides it's time to bring their cat-and-mouse game to a *satisfying* end.

Twenty years ago, Tyler's father walked out and left him with a mountain of responsibility. Now that his younger siblings are settled, the last thing he wants or needs is another obligation. Which is exactly what he'll get if he screws around with the Alpha's sister.

When Zoe offers—more like *demands*—a no-strings affair, temptation wins and he finds his hands in places they shouldn't be, and his thoughts straying to words like *his*. But Zoe's got her own ideas about possessive, chest-banging males. And they don't include white picket fences...or letting Tyler keep her out of the danger zone when an outside threat to the pride's secrecy becomes all too real.

Warning: This story contains sexual relations, manipulations, ultimatums and two strong-willed shifters determined to be on top.

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Serengeti Sunrise

Vivi Andrews

Dedication

For you, my lovely readers, who ~~nagged me~~ sweetly asked for Zoe's story from the moment she stepped onto the page in *Serengeti Heat*. Thank you for returning to the pride with me.

Chapter One

Zoe King was screwed—in the least fun interpretation of the word.

You break one little rule and it bites you on the ass. Every. Damn. Time.

She glared at the white smoke billowing out from under the jeep's hood. Lately, her luck sucked donkey balls.

So much for her secret, back-before-anyone-knew-she-was-gone trip into town. She hadn't even made it out to the main highway before the jeep decided it would rather be a fog machine.

Stranded on a dusty country road. Zoe King, kickass rock-star goddess of the lioness persuasion, had been reduced to a *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* cliché.

Pathetic.

She could've hoofed it back to the ranch, but she'd still have to explain how the jeep had come to be broken down on the side of the road, four miles outside the property boundaries. Confess later or confess now—at some point there would be shit hitting fans.

Zoe wasn't the kind of girl who put things off. She lived her life by the motto: now or never, preferably *now*.

So she called her brother and admitted she left the ranch without permission. *Permission*. As if she was an infant who couldn't take care of herself. She was a grown woman and a shape-shifter, for Christ's sake. A lioness lived inside her skin and on a good day she could even kick her big brother the almighty Alpha's ass. How much trouble could she possibly get into?

Of course, Landon didn't see it that way. She had to listen to a solid ten minutes of her brother playing Master of the Pride before he finally got tired of bitching her out—or decided he'd have more fun doing it in person—and told her he'd already sent out the cavalry.

And she knew just who he'd sent. Dammit.

Zoe propped a hip against the dented side of the old jeep, folded her arms and tipped her face back to soak in the sun, trying for a Zen state as she waited. The heat crawled over her skin, thick and heavy, but at least it hadn't reached the please-God-kill-me-now levels of midsummer yet. They were still a few months and a dozen degrees shy of that lovely experience.

And, if there was a God, she'd be long gone before the summer heat hit. Off to greener pastures. Independent again. Free.

Of course, she needed more than God. She needed a car that could make it more than four miles from the ranch before breaking down.

Goddamn useless mechanic.

Zoe shifted her weight against the jeep's dented door and closed her eyes. *Think Zen, dammit.*

The heat from the metal bled through her jeans. She didn't have a lot of experience with Zen states, and she had a feeling she was sucking at this one, but luckily she didn't have long to wait.

Zoe barely had time to perfect her I-don't-give-a-shit pose before she heard the distinctive coughing roar of a truck's engine speeding toward her, sounding eerily like the pissed-off lion she knew would be sitting behind the steering wheel. She didn't open her eyes to watch him approach. Her other senses were a fraction sharper with her eyes shut, and she wanted to focus on the little sensory details so she wouldn't think about the asshole bearing down on her in the tow truck.

He already got too many of her stray thoughts as it was.

Gravel scuttled beneath the truck's tires as it pulled off onto the shoulder behind the jeep. Zoe's nose twitched as a whisper of a breeze carried grainy dust particles to tease her nostrils and stick against the sweat-kissed skin of her temples.

The constant dust was just another of the joys of living in west Texas. She couldn't step two feet outside her bungalow without feeling like every inch of her exposed skin had been coated in a fine film of dirt. How Landon could actually like it here, she couldn't imagine.

Well, actually she could imagine. But Landon's affection for Bumfuck Nowhere, West Texas had more to do with his mate Ava's manifest charms than it did any driving need to be bathed in dust on a daily basis. If Zoe had gotten laid *once* over the last goddamn *year*, she might be in a slightly better frame of mind herself. But the pussified lions at the pride wouldn't lay a finger on the Alpha's baby sister. The cowards.

The truck's engine gave one last coughing roar before it cut off abruptly. Zoe held herself perfectly still. *Zen*, she reminded herself as she drank in her surroundings from behind closed eyes.

The groaning squeak of the truck's door opening. The soft scrape of footsteps on gravel. The teasing, musky scent of male lion mingling with engine oil and the dry dusty scent of earth on the breeze. The slam of the truck's door. Then the sound of his voice, the low, rumbling growl coming from deep inside that broad chest.

"What did you do to it?"

Zoe ground her molars. God, he was an ass. Why couldn't she just hate him? It would make things so much easier.

"I didn't *do* anything to it," she snapped, leaving the *asshole* implied. "Other than try to drive it. I had no idea that was such an unreasonable thing to demand from a car."

She tipped her chin down so the wide brim of her cowgirl hat hid her eyes before she opened them. The sight of him hit her in the gut like it always did. And *that* was why she still couldn't seem to hate him. *Goddamn chemistry.*

He strolled past her toward the smoking hood of the jeep with the rolling, liquid gait that would have been equally at home on a cowboy or a cat—which was only fair, since Tyler Minor was a little bit of both. He was tall, as all the Minor brothers were tall. Corded with muscle, as all the Minor men were strapped. But he was the only one of the Big Bad Minor Foursome who'd ever made her heart gallop just by walking into a room.

Tyler had presence, that indefinable awareness of a man who knew he was the ruler of all he saw. It was the unmistakable aura of an Alpha—but Tyler had never been, nor did he appear to ever want to be, the Alpha of the pride. Instead her lummo of a big brother got to boss everyone around while Tyler watched it all with stoic eyes.

And while he watched her with barely banked heat.

Tyler Minor had been watching Zoe, owning her with his damn eyes, since the day she arrived at Three Rocks Ranch over a year ago. The heat behind the liquid gold of his gaze never failed to call up an answering spark low in her belly. He could make her wet with just a look—and as keen as his sense of smell was, the bastard had to know it—but he'd never once acted on the lust burning behind his eyes.

She knew he wanted her. She *knew* it. But he never *touched* her. Just looking. Always looking. Stepping back when she stepped forward. Circling around and dodging her every advance. He would look at her with naked hunger and then just shut it off and walk away. Running hot and cold until she wanted to scream at him to just fuck her already.

It was almost enough to give a girl self-esteem issues.

If anyone else had ever managed to make her half as hot and bothered without so much as a touch, she'd have written off Tyler Minor months ago. But no one else got under her skin and made her writhe the way he did. She couldn't control or contain it. Like the motion of the planets, it just was and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.

Damn the man for being the sexiest hunk of masculinity—shifter or human—she'd ever laid eyes on. He practically projected a field of testosterone. And damn if that didn't turn her crank in a big way, though she'd chew off her own tongue before admitting it to him. Even if he could probably smell it on her.

Tyler propped open the hood and bent to poke at something inside. Zoe's eyes locked on the faded denim stretched lovingly over his ass. She licked her lips and wandered over to stand behind him for a better angle on her favorite body part.

"You shouldn't have left the ranch unescorted," he said without taking his eyes off the engine. "You know how things are right now."

Things was a nice way of referring to the epic shitstorm at the pride lately, but Zoe didn't particularly want to talk about the fact that she'd broken The Rule and left without permission. "What are you, my keeper?"

"Honey, you couldn't pay me enough to take that job." Still bent to show off his best side, he flicked a look at her beneath the arm he'd propped against the hood above him.

It was *that* look. The one that made her breath come faster, her heartbeat picking up in a helpless response only this imbecile seemed to inspire. She took half a step forward.

Then his eyes dismissed her, locking back on the engine block. "I'm just here for the car."

Zoe's temper flared like a sparkler on the Fourth of July. Damn but she hated it when he ignored her. Almost as much as she hated it when he made her want him with a look.

She needed a reaction—*any* reaction—to prove she owned him as much as he owned her.

"Anyone ever tell you you're a shitty mechanic?"

"Only you," he grunted. "Repeatedly."

"Well, it bears repeating. Cars are supposed to run. FYI."

Tyler growled without looking up from the engine. "*This* car wasn't supposed to be taken off the ranch until I replaced the radiator. That's why the keys were in my *office* and not hanging on the board with the others."

Zoe shrugged, unrepentant. "Landon padlocked the board. You didn't lock your office."

"A mistake I won't be repeating."

"A smart man would leave a set of keys out so I wouldn't have to break into his office to get them. Or try to teach myself how to hotwire a car on one of his precious jeeps."

"A smart woman would listen to her damn Alpha and stay the hell on the ranch like everyone else until things calm down in town."

Zoe smiled sweetly. "Then I guess neither of us has much in the way of intelligence."

He twisted, his eyes locking on her again. There was a subtle threat in that look, filled with his need to dominate her. Her heart rate accelerated.

"There's a reason none of us are supposed to leave the ranch right now, Zoe. It isn't just your own life you're risking with your recklessness." The muscles in his neck were corded with anger—which, perversely, just made her want to lick them.

Which, even more perversely, made her want to punch him. The constant compulsion to push him until he pushed back couldn't be healthy, but she needed to break through his reserve and feel the reckless heat beneath that calm, controlled surface like she needed to keep breathing. It wasn't even conscious anymore—fighting with him, goading him. It had passed habit and become reflex.

"It wasn't *my* recklessness that got us into this position in the first place," she countered. "I believe that was *your* baby brother and his floor show at the Bar Nothing."

A muscle jumped in his jaw as his gaze retreated back to the engine. “Michael’s apologized for that.”

“Aw, that’s sweet. But maybe Michael shouldn’t have gone into a bar and half-shifted in front of two dozen humans in the first place.”

The muscles in his shoulders tensed, and Zoe felt a dim flicker of guilt. Tyler’s family was his only weak spot—a weak spot she’d been poking at ever since she discovered it. Never let it be said that Zoe King didn’t fight dirty.

She wasn’t even really annoyed with Michael. Yes, he’d fucked up by showing too much of his animal side in a human bar, but it hadn’t been on purpose and as yet the world hadn’t come crashing down around their ears.

In fact, not a damn thing had happened.

It had been over a month. A month of battenning down the hatches and bracing for the worst. A month of waiting to see if the humans had seen enough to call in the media and the scientists—the media to turn them into a freak show and the scientists to turn them into lab rats.

Humans didn’t tend to react well to things that were different and a bunch of men, women and children who could shapeshift into giant predators at will definitely fell into the *different* category.

Zoe was inclined to give their homo sapiens cousins the benefit of the doubt—there hadn’t been a witch burning in centuries—but she was in the minority at the pride. The fear of what *might* be done to them if their secret was exposed, as well as the tradition of zealous secrecy, had kept the scattered shifter prides and packs all over the world from revealing themselves to the humans long ago.

When Michael inadvertently let the cat out of the bag—so to speak—Zoe had momentarily thought Landon, her forward-thinking brother, would take the opportunity to come out to the humans. Instead, he’d called in all their nomads and strays, commanded everyone to stay on the ranch indefinitely, and held his breath, waiting for the humans to lay siege.

And nothing had happened.

Tensions had been at DEFCON One for weeks now. After a month of isolating a bunch of cranky lions on the ranch, Zoe wasn’t the only one going stir crazy. She was just the only one fearless—or, as Tyler accused, reckless—enough to break the rules.

“I don’t see what difference it makes if I go into town to buy tic tacs. What are they going to do? Stone me in the Stop ’N’ Shop?”

Tyler straightened suddenly, turning his back on the jeep and facing her, his gold eyes blazing. “Tell me you weren’t going to put us all at risk for some *tic tacs*,” he demanded. “You aren’t that stupid.”

Zoe’s hackles went up at his icy growl, even as a thrill of victory shot down to her core now that she had Tyler’s undivided attention. She dug in her heels as he prowled toward her, holding her ground. Excitement sizzled in her blood, but she rolled her eyes, feigning scorn and an indifference she’d never felt around him.

"I wasn't actually going to buy tic tacs. I was just going to roll into town and see if there was anyone suspicious hanging around. Do some reconnaissance. I'm sick of waiting for the bad guys to strike without even knowing if there are bad guys in the first place."

His golden eyes darkened. "We're being cautious."

"We're being ostriches," she snapped. "It's idiotic. And I for one am sick of being afraid of my shadow. I want to see if the Big Bad Wolf is actually in town before I hide inside my straw house and wait for him to huff and puff at me."

"There's been an increase of trespassers."

"High school kids. Pranks. It's the end of the school year. Has anyone gotten anywhere near the main buildings? No. And even if it is the boogeyman, don't you want to know what he looks like?"

Tyler stopped advancing. He rocked back on his heels, the heat in his eyes cooling. "Huh."

How did he do that? Just shut off all that gorgeous fury from one second to the next. *Why* did he do it, dammit? Zoe narrowed her eyes at him and planted her hands on her hips. "Huh what? What does *huh* mean?"

"You have a point. We should know what's going on in town. Just hiding out isn't going to keep us safe." Then his eyes darkened again. "But you should have told Landon what you were up to. What if something happened to you and no one knew where you'd gone?"

Zoe pursed her lips. "If I told Landon I wanted to check out the town, he would have sent you or Caleb instead. I brought my phone in case I ran into any trouble." She pulled the cell out of her pocket and waved it in front of him. "And even if I did run into trouble, I'm not helpless. I can take care of myself."

He arched an eyebrow toward the broken-down jeep. Damn supercilious bastard.

Zoe glared. "Just because I can't repair a busted radiator doesn't mean I'm a damsel in distress. I could kick your ass any day of the week, Tyler Minor." She put a rumble of a growl into the words, a challenge for supremacy and dominance. *Just try to take me on, big boy.*

The challenge caught something primitive and instinctive inside him. He stepped forward, looming over her, trying to use his size to intimidate her. At five ten in her bare feet, Zoe wasn't the kind of girl who was easy to loom over, but when a man could manage it, it never failed to make her toes curl.

Tyler didn't just manage it. Tyler loomed like an angry Greek god. Mouthwatering and imposing all at once.

His eyes held hers and her heart began to pound. *Do it. Push back. Touch me.* Zoe swayed forward.

And Tyler shut off.

Just like that. Between one heartbeat and the next, Tyler went from looming Greek god to aloof and disinterested. His gaze slid away from her, focusing on some vague point behind her left shoulder for a moment before he turned away.

“Wait over there until I have the jeep on the hitch.” He pointed to a dusty patch of grass off the side of the road without looking back at her or breaking stride as he walked back to the tow truck.

Frustration built in her throat, but she managed to keep from screaming. Or roaring her rage. She’d had a lot of practice.

Running away again. In the last year, Zoe had seen Tyler in retreat more than any other sight. Her gaze rolled over the tense muscles in his wide shoulders down to the lean hips and that God-almighty-gorgeous ass. She couldn’t seem to stop scaring him off, which sucked a little more every day.

But at least the view was nice.

Chapter Two

Tyler beat a strategic retreat back to his truck. Backing down wasn't in his nature, but it was becoming a habit around Zoe. It was either that or pin her against the jeep and show her who was boss. Kiss her until she couldn't remember her own name, screw her until all she could say was his—which was completely out of the question. The Alpha's only sister was not someone you fucked around with, and the absolute last thing Tyler needed right now was another commitment, another goddamn responsibility.

So he walked away. Every. Single. Fucking. Time.

Because it was the smart choice. The responsible choice. The only choice that wouldn't completely fuck up the rest of his life.

He just had to remind himself of that whenever she was standing there in front of him with her eyes flashing with equal parts lust and anger. She looked like a walking invitation to all his best fantasies, but she might as well have had a neon flashing *Hands Off* sign on her forehead.

So Tyler kept his hands off and focused on the parts of his life he could get a grip on. Cars. Engines never made him feel like he'd jumped off a cliff without a parachute.

He drove the tow truck in front of the dead jeep and jumped out to winch it up onto the flatbed. He could feel Zoe watching him. No surprise there. He could never be around her without being excruciatingly aware of her presence. He couldn't control that, but he could control his response to her. So he didn't respond. He ignored her—as much as anyone could ignore someone who smelled like heaven on a stick—and put his back into cranking the old-fashioned flatbed down at an angle so he could drag the jeep up onto it.

But Zoe, being Zoe, couldn't let herself be ignored for long.

"You know, they have these new handy-dandy mechanical thingies. You just hit a button and zip." She snapped her fingers. "It tilts like magic."

"This one works fine." He grunted, leaning his weight into it.

She muttered something that sounded a lot like "ornery son of a bitch" and scuffed her boot in the dirt, kicking up a mini-tornado.

He didn't bother to explain that he would rather put in the effort to keep up something with some history behind it working than buy a brand-new piece of crap that was just going to be outdated in a few weeks anyway. Too many things worth keeping got discarded when something bright and shiny and new came along. He enjoyed babying the old jeeps on the ranch until they purred for him.

But if Zoe thought he was a contrary SOB, that was simpler for both of them, so he let her think it. She paced restlessly at his side and he pretended not to notice the way the tip of her long blonde ponytail flicked against the small of her back with each step, guiding his eye down to the twitch of her ass.

“You really aren’t pissed at Michael? Not even a little?”

Tyler forced himself not to react visibly. *Pissed* couldn’t hold a candle to what he’d felt when Michael told him about going half-furry in public.

After twenty years of being the responsible older brother, raising his siblings, living his life for their happiness and their safety, avoiding unnecessary chances and sacrificing his own opportunities so they would have more...after twenty goddamn years, Tyler had been a heartbeat away from seeing all four of them settled—happy and safe. A whisper away from leaving the pride and taking off on his own—who knew for how long, but any time he had would be his and his alone. No responsibilities. No obligations. Responsible for no one’s happiness but his own.

Then Michael half-shifted in front of a bar full of witnesses.

Tyler had tried rationalization. Everyone was drunk on a Friday night—they wouldn’t know what they’d seen. He hadn’t fully shifted—lots of special-effects guys could make claws and fur seem to sprout on people’s hands, and who didn’t have a pair of fake fangs these days?

But no matter how he tried to rationalize it, the truth remained. The pride was at risk. And Tyler couldn’t leave his siblings—the only family he had left—until he knew they would all be safe.

So he was trapped. Again.

To say he’d been pissed at Michael... It was more accurate to say he’d wanted to shred his baby brother’s hide.

But there was no way in hell he was telling Zoe that.

Trust her to ask what everyone else was too tactful to say. Trust Zoe to shove her nose in where it had no business. The woman had no goddamn sense of boundaries whatsoever.

His anger with Michael was none of her business. It didn’t affect her or the pride or anyone other than himself. The pointless frustration boiled in his gut, but he refused to give it an outlet. He was a lion, not a goddamn dog. He didn’t howl at the moon over what might have been.

Life was one shitstorm after another, but there was no changing it, so you sucked it up and played the hand you got dealt with a fucking smile on your face.

Tyler kept his hands working steadily and didn’t so much as flinch when her question prodded the embers of frustration burning in his gut. “No,” he said flatly, working the winch up higher.

She inched closer, hovering right over his shoulder. “It was gonna come out eventually anyway, right?” She swayed from foot to foot, the constant motion tugging at his peripheral vision as he locked the jeep in place and cranked the flatbed level. “If not Michael, someone else would have been seen. And it’s not like he could help it. And who knows, it might be a good thing in the long run, right? If we weren’t

trying to hide what we are from doctors and scientists, they might be able to help fix whatever imbalance keeps Michael from being able to control his shifting. Landon needs to get his head out of his ass and treat this like the opportunity it is.”

Tyler grunted and steered her toward the cab of the truck, careful not to touch her. Platonic touch was traded casually in the pride, but he always avoided putting his hands on Zoe, never entirely certain he would be able to get them off her again if he gave in to the temptation of her smooth, golden skin.

“He picked a hell of a time to go all barbarian traditional Alpha,” Zoe grumbled. “Right now is when we need to be taking action, framing the way our debut into the world is going to go. Not hiding out and bracing for the worst.”

She bounced into the cab, so caught up in her complaints she didn’t seem aware of what her body was doing. Tyler was aware enough for the both of them. He watched her ass in the tight jeans, the movement of her full breasts beneath the too-thin T-shirt. His mouth watered and his palms itched, but he just slammed the passenger door and rounded the hood.

As soon as he opened the driver’s door, Zoe started in again. “You could talk to him. He listens to you. If you told him—”

“Not my call,” he said shortly, cutting her off before she could get going. “Alpha’s decision.”

Zoe snorted. “Oh please. That isn’t you.”

Tyler ignored her, cranking the key until the truck’s engine sprang to life with a jagged roar. He shoved the truck into gear and pulled out onto the deserted country road, headed back toward the ranch.

“Caleb is the soldier in your family,” Zoe continued. “You’re the thinker.”

“I’m the mechanic.”

Zoe twisted toward him and he tried not to notice the way her legs draped over the bench seat between them, her knee brushing the outside of his thigh through two layers of denim. “You analyze everything,” Zoe insisted.

He couldn’t argue that. Right now he was analyzing exactly how long it would take him to get her jeans down around her ankles and her knees over his shoulders if he pulled the truck off to the side of the road. Twenty, maybe thirty seconds. That big-ass silver belt buckle she’d taken to wearing lately might slow him down some.

“You have opinions about everything. Typical alpha I-know-best-and-you-must-obey bullshit, even if you shove it all down and try to pretend it isn’t there. I bet you always get your way, right?”

Only rigid control kept Tyler from laughing out loud at that. He always got his own way, did he? Whoever Zoe thought she was talking about, it sure as hell wasn’t him. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d done anything just for himself.

“You’re more manipulative than the other he-man lions in the pride though. I bet you’re the one who taught Ava everything she knows about diplomacy.”

“Something you never learned, apparently.”

Zoe’s soft laughter rippled out to fill the cab. Not the reaction he’d expected, but Zoe rarely conformed to expectations. The brim of her cowboy hat knocked against the window, tipping it back so he had a better view of her face and the easy warmth of her smile. A knot tightened low in his gut.

“I never did see much point in tact.” She linked her fingers over the knee wedged against his thigh, the backs of her fingers pressing into his leg. His jeans suddenly felt tight, but he couldn’t remove her hand without acknowledging her touch affected him, so he tightened his hands on the steering wheel, keeping his eyes locked on the road ahead.

“What I don’t get is why *you* need to be Mr. Diplomacy. Ava, I get. She’s tiny and that’s like tattooing *kick me* on your forehead in the prides. But you’re one of the biggest shifters I’ve ever seen. Why weren’t you the Alpha before Landon and I showed up? Are you just a really crappy fighter or something?”

His lion sent a growl rumbling out of his throat at the insult before he could swallow it down.

Zoe chuckled and her fingers uncurled to pet his thigh. “Down, boy.”

He wanted her hands on him, petting, stroking. Just a little higher. Her skin would be soft, her hands firm and capable. Stroking him from base to tip, wringing need from him in juicy drops...

Tyler grabbed her hand off his leg and flicked it away from him before he gave in to the urge to grind himself against her. “Not everyone wants to rule the world.” His voice sounded odd—too rough and low.

She folded her arms across her stomach, tucking her knees in so they no longer pressed against him. He didn’t suspect for a second he’d hurt her feelings with the rebuff. With Zoe, a strategic retreat was much more likely. Feint and parry. Retreat and advance. A constant campaign to test for weaknesses in his defenses.

She tipped her head and the cowboy hat slid back farther. “I get that you aren’t power crazy, but my impression is that pride life was pretty much hell under Leonus. I’m surprised you wouldn’t take him out just to improve living conditions. Seems like that kind of noble shit would be right up your alley.”

He could have explained. He could have told her that he was Alpha of his own pride: Caleb, Kane, Michael and Ava. Protecting his younger siblings had been his top priority since his father left. Being Alpha of Three Rocks would have made him responsible for ten times as many lions. He couldn’t care for that many and still look after his four the way he needed to, so he had ruthlessly suppressed his frustration at the way the pride was run under Leonus. His family came first. Always.

“I never claimed to be noble.”

Zoe hummed her agreement. “Tricky thing, nobility. The more claims you make to it, the less you have.”

“So I must be noble because I told you I’m not?”

She shook her head and the cowboy hat gave up the fight, tumbling down over her shoulder. She caught it one-handed and tucked it into her lap, running her long, slim fingers over the brim. “It doesn’t

work in reverse,” she explained. “But if you’d said you were noble, I’d have known you were full of shit. Denial is a good sign.”

He flicked her a glance out of the corner of his eye and had trouble looking away. They were on the ranch drive now, so he didn’t really need to pay much attention to the road, but looking at it was safer than watching her. Zoe King was a hazard to his senses.

Curled in the passenger seat like the cat she was, her green-gold eyes never wavered from him as her fingers stroked patterns in the hat, teasing him with thoughts of those same fingers branding patterns into his skin with a touch.

God, she was gorgeous. Tall and strong like a Viking goddess, with curves just where he wanted them. Her face was so actively expressive it was easy to miss the sheer beauty of it—the high cheekbones and lush, inviting fullness of her mouth. Tyler often found himself captivated by her constantly changing expressions. He could sit and watch her for hours, sucked in by the way each thought and emotion tracked across her face.

He yanked his gaze away and locked it back on the road.

She was quicksand. She’d suck him in and trap him here so he’d never be free. He just needed to keep reminding himself of that.

“Don’t worry. I don’t expect you to be gallant and noble.” Her voice was low and smooth, a purring invitation to sin. “Virtue is so overrated. I like my knights rough with their armor a little tarnished around the edges.”

The scent of her twined around him in the cab, the tang of ginger mixed with something dark and rich. Tyler rolled down the window, taking a deep breath of the dry, dusty air in an attempt to get some more blood flowing to his brain instead of diverting to his crotch.

Her knees inched closer again, brushing against the side of his leg. With every bounce along the rutted dirt drive, she edged toward him. If not for the seat belt keeping her back, she probably would have crawled onto his lap. Tyler’s brain began to melt at the thought of her straddling his lap, her lush curves rising above him.

Zoe’d never made any secret of the fact that she wanted him—she wasn’t exactly the coy type—but he’d ignored every hint and passed up every not-so-subtle invitation. If he acknowledged that she wanted him, if he gave her any clue that it was the thought of her he jacked off to in the shower every night, she would never give up.

And he needed her to give up. He couldn’t take much more temptation from Zoe King.

He didn’t need another rock tying him to the ranch. He’d played Atlas too long to want to shoulder any more responsibilities. And Zoe would be a massive weight on his life if he let her in.

You didn’t jilt the Alpha’s sister. Especially when the Alpha was married to your own sister. If Zoe got her hooks into him, Tyler would stay here, trapped on the ranch. Forever.

Shit, if Zoe got her hooks in him, he might not even mind the life sentence.

“Tyler?” Her voice was a throaty rasp that did nothing for his calm.

He realized his knuckles had gone white from his grip on the steering wheel and forced them to loosen as he drove the truck through the main gates and toward the garage.

The ranch had gone through several incarnations before it had ended up as the headquarters for the largest shape-shifter pride in West Texas. Since its first life as a summer bible camp, it had undergone substantial changes, but the clusters of cabins surrounding the communal dining hall had suited the lions perfectly. Another previous owner had added the requisite outbuildings and fencing to turn it into a cattle ranch—though the Three Rocks pride owned just enough cattle to provide their own game on the traditional semi-annual hunts.

With the addition of their own schoolhouse, medical clinic, his garage and a massive greenhouse, they’d done what they could to become their own community, independent of the outside world. Everyone contributed in the pride. Many of their members had telecommuted or worked in town to bring in additional cash, but most of those with jobs in town had lost them in the last month.

In spite of the unwritten rule that everyone work for the good of the pride, the pace of life was slower here. Like their feline cousins, the lion-shifters were sensualists who valued their indulgences and relaxation with a European appreciation. They felt safe enough to reveal their true natures here—in spite of the concerns about the town.

This afternoon was no exception, perfect for a hammock and a cold beer. Shifters basked in the sun in both lion form and human.

And Tyler didn’t see any of it. Zoe consumed every one of his senses as he threaded the tow truck along the service road that twisted through the maintenance buildings, toward his garage.

The cab had begun to feel like a cage. His lion chafed at the restriction, pressing against the inside of his skin.

God, the scent of her. It was killing him. How could she tease him to a frenzy with just a brush of her leg and the heady intoxication of her scent?

“Are you in heat?” His voice lashed across the cab, whip-crack sharp.

The unmated pride females were tucked away during their heat for a damn good reason. The scent of them made the males crazed with lust. It was chemical, uncontrollable. A biological imperative for a sexual marathon. He was hard to the point of pain, but it wasn’t his fault. She had to be in heat. There was no other explanation.

Zoe made a small choked sound in her throat. It was her uncharacteristic lack of a response that lured his eyes from the road. Her constantly changing expression had stilled, her body tense and motionless. “You can’t tell the difference,” she whispered, almost to herself.

Too late Tyler realized what he'd just disclosed if she *wasn't* in heat. *Shit*. He'd just admitted she drove him wild. He might as well have told her he wanted to fuck her until she couldn't stand. Which, God help him, he did.

A year of denying himself. A year of unrelenting sacrifice. A year of keeping his damn hands to himself to convince her he didn't want her and he'd just ruined it in one fell swoop.

Give her an inch and she'll take your whole life. He felt like he was trying to put the sand back into a shattered hourglass—like every grain was a piece of his freedom he'd never get back.

"The way you're acting. It's like you're in heat," he said in a fast, desperate attempt to repair the damage.

One of Zoe's brows slid up toward her hairline. "What gave me away? Was it the striptease while you were hooking the car to the tow hitch or my attempts to give you a blowjob while you drove?"

His jean tightened like a vise in Pavlovian response as her lips formed the words *blowjob* and *striptease*. Tyler winced, drowning in lust and a sensation that wasn't unlike blind panic. His brain was short-circuiting, but he just needed to focus on the task at hand. Turn Zoe over to her brother. End of story.

His judgment was in shreds. He couldn't be alone with her right now.

And he sure as hell couldn't tell her he'd gone hard from just the scent of her and her knee bumping his thigh. It had happened only because he'd been living like a goddamn monk for the last few months, and he'd be damned before he defended himself to her. Zoe might be able to talk circles around him, but he could control the silence.

He'd built a stable environment for his siblings growing up, even when things were shitty and chaotic in the pride, and he did it by always keeping a level head. Always rising above attempts to bait him, always pushing down his own desires for the good of his family. Restraint, control, sacrifice. He'd lived those words until they'd become who he was.

What was it about Zoe that threatened all that?

He spun the wheel, pulling the truck around behind his garage and slamming it into park.

"Tyler—"

"The Alpha's expecting us." He cut her off, killing the engine and jerking the key free of the ignition. He was out of the car and halfway to the back door of the garage before the truck's engine stopped wheezing and rattling.

Tyler didn't wait to see if she was following. He didn't need to. Zoe wouldn't give up so easily. She didn't know how.

Zoe King, gorgeous and unstoppable. His own personal silver bullet.

Chapter Three

Bastard. Tyler was six feet away, the cab still shuddering from the slam of the door, when all of Zoe's year-long frustration crashed over her like a wave.

No way. He was *not* walking away from her. Not this time.

Zoe had wanted Tyler from the first second she'd laid eyes on him and when she wanted something, she went after it with everything she had. So there was no reason why she shouldn't have him by now.

The entire drive back to the ranch she'd been tempted to crawl into his lap. The urge to break through his reserve and stir up the banked heat beneath taunted her. When he'd asked if she was in heat, it had spun her world like a top. It was all the proof she needed. Tyler Minor wanted her. Unequivocal, no two ways about it, sweet, hot *lust*.

And she'd hesitated. For a nanosecond there in the cab, for the first time in her life, nervous uncertainty had spiraled through her chest. And he just left. When the creaking slam of the car door jolted her, the uncertainty flashed into hurt and quickly twisted into its cousin, anger.

This wasn't over. He didn't get to just pretend nothing had happened. Not today.

Zoe launched herself out of the truck. "Tyler!" His only response was the clang of the heavy metal door to the garage slamming behind him after he ducked inside. "*Dammit.*" She stalked after him. Cutting through the garage was the fastest way to the main part of the compound, but they weren't finished here yet and she was going to make sure he knew it.

She ran to the door, jerked it open and surged through, carried on a tide of indignant frustration.

"Tyler!" Her shout echoed in the garage bay along with the ringing clang of the heavy door banging shut behind her. "Stop running and face me, you coward!"

Two yards from the front exit, Tyler's feet took root on the concrete floor. She could hear a growl rumbling in his chest. His lion must not have liked being called a coward. Well, hers didn't much like him running away from her.

Her lioness was ready for this fight, had been itching for it for months.

He turned to face her, his eyes narrowed and hands loose around his hips like a gunslinger. As they faced one another across the length of the garage, she felt that high-noon feeling herself. Tension snapped in the air, the unavoidable sense that *something* was coming. Something that had been bearing down on them for a while now.

Love or war. Whichever it was, there wasn't any middle ground. They'd burned it all away with the friction of the last year.

"Coward?" he asked, his voice a soft, dark rumble.

"You have another word you'd prefer?" She strolled across the concrete floor, adding an extra sway to her hips as she came to stand directly in front of him. "Chicken? Pussy, perhaps?"

"Don't push me, Zoe." He rumbled the warning.

"Or what? You gonna show me who's boss? Or are you just gonna run away like you always do? Like a coward."

His lips pulled back from his teeth in a snarl and he loomed over her. She could practically feel his lion pushing against his skin, burning with the need to prove to her, once and for all, which one of them would end up on top if it ever came down to a battle for dominance. He might play at being civilized, but Tyler wanted to make her submit. She could see it in the luminous feline gold of his eyes.

"Are you going to kiss me or throttle me?" Zoe tipped her chin back, meeting his eyes with a blatant challenge. "Whichever you're going to do, do it now. Because I'm sick of waiting for you to make up your mind."

"What makes you think I didn't make up my mind months ago and you just can't take a hint?"

"What hint was that? The way you stare at me when you think I'm not looking? How you take the longest possible path between your bungalow and the garage each evening just so you can go past my house? Or maybe the fact that you can't tell when I'm in heat because you *always* want me?"

He turned away, striding toward the door. "That's quite a healthy ego you have there."

"It's all in my head, is that it?" He put his hand on the door and Zoe felt her composure fracture. "Dammit, Tyler! What the fuck is your deal?" He didn't turn back to her, but he didn't open the door either. She shouted at his back. "You want me. I've made it embarrassingly obvious I want you too. So what is the big problem?"

"Your brother..."

"I'm twenty-seven years old. I don't have to ask his permission to fuck whoever the hell I want."

He turned, leaning his shoulders against the door, one hand still resting on the knob. "He's the Alpha—"

"So what? This has nothing to do with him. He doesn't even have to know."

"He'll know."

"Who the fuck cares? Because I'm the Alpha's sister, I'm not allowed to get any?"

"I don't want any more commitments in my life. I'm sick of being responsible for everyone."

"Who's talking about a commitment? I'm talking about *sex*. Fucking. Screwing. Banging our brains out. No strings attached. I never *asked* you for a fucking commitment, dumbass."

"It's never going to be no strings. Not with the Alpha's sister."

“God, I am so sick of being the Alpha’s sister. I’m *Zoe*. Can we just have one conversation that doesn’t include Landon?”

Tyler thunked his head back against the door. “Look, Zoe, if I wanted to stay here at the pride for the rest of my life and mate with a little lioness who’d give me lots of fat babies, you’d be the first person I’d—”

She cut him off with a solid punch to his shoulder that made him wince. “You *asshole*. Would you listen to me for five seconds? *I don’t want to marry you*. I’m not Mara the fucking baby-making machine. If you tried to give me a picket fence, I would rip up the posts and shove them up your ass. So stop trying to put me in that box.” She slapped her palms flat on his chest, baring her teeth up at him. “I want sex. And I want it from you. So do you want me or not? Because I’m done waiting. We’re deciding this, once and for all. Are you a man or what? Because for someone with the teeth of an alpha lion, you’re awfully fucking scared of me.”

He grabbed her so fast her back was slamming against the door before she even realized his hands were on her waist. Her hat went flying, landing somewhere on the dirty floor. “Scared, am I?” He gripped her jaw and forced her face up to his. “Does this look like fear to you?”

His expression was harsh and unforgiving, the animal running close to the surface. There was nothing contained or distant about the heat in his eyes. *Who is this man and what has he done with Tyler Minor?* Zoe’s breathing quickened.

His claws flexed against her side. Zoe wet her lips. She’d goaded him to this.

A little flicker of misgiving flared in her chest.

“Hasn’t anyone told you not to bait lions?” he growled, palming her nape.

Zoe’s heart stopped then restarted and accelerated. The nervous sensation got lost in a flood of heat as he took command. *Finally*. This was it. After a year of foreplay, it was finally happening. Quick, rough, one and done. At last, she’d get over this stupid obsession.

Tyler Minor had her pinned between hard and harder, leaving no doubt in her mind exactly how much he wanted her. Then he leaned in and sealed his mouth over hers, and Zoe forgot everything but the taste of him. This wasn’t just a quickie to get him out of her system. This was *everything*.

He hadn’t expected her to taste so good.

The tang of her went straight to his brain and shut it down. He didn’t need it anyway—for the first time in his life, pure animal instinct took control. His lion clamored to claim her completely. After a year of buildup, he craved her, needing nothing more than to dive in and drown in her.

Zoe made a jagged, needy sound and stabbed her fingers through his hair, tilting her head to invite him deeper. She hooked her legs around his waist and he stepped closer, notching his hardness at the apex of her thighs, crushing her against the door. She clutched his shoulders, purring throatily, and Tyler

realized, with the distant part of his brain that was still running on auxiliary power, that Zoe wasn't going to stop him.

Dimly, he recalled his master plan. Something about teaching her not to tease him? But this wasn't a tease. This was a full-body erotic invitation.

Tyler caught her ponytail in his fist, holding her steady as he devoured her mouth. Her scent swamped him, clouding his senses until he felt savage, feeling nothing more keenly than the throbbing need to make her submit. Where was his famous self-control?

He shoved her thin T-shirt up above her breasts, barely managing to keep from shredding it with his claws. She released him long enough to yank the shirt over her head and fling it aside, then her hands were fumbling with the buttons of his shirt, her own claws extending and retracting.

Tyler reached over his shoulder with one hand, the other palming her ass. He grabbed a fistful of fabric and jerked the shirt off over his head, sending a couple buttons plinging against the concrete. Zoe made a hungry sound and her hands stroked his chest, petting and kneading until he leaned into her and she had to move them or get them caught between their bodies. The feel of her, pressed hot against his skin, was sheer perfection. He ground his erection into her heat and she cried out as the friction hit her clit, her green-gold eyes dark with need.

Zoe clutched his shoulders, moaning, "*More*," against the shell of his ear.

Didn't that just figure? He owned her body right now and she was still making demands. The woman just didn't know how to stop pushing.

Luckily, he was inclined to give her what she wanted.

He held her steady with a hand on her ass and ground into her again, gently biting the curve of her shoulder as his other hand slid up her side to cup the fullness of her breast. Her strong thighs squeezed his hips as her own began to move against him. She moaned his name, then whispered it brokenly, repeating it until it became a mantra, a rhythmic plea and exultation rolled into one.

Tyler fumbled with her belt, cursing softly, until Zoe shoved his hands aside and unfastened it with quick, deft fingers. He had no trouble with the row of buttons on her fly, flicking them loose and sliding his hand inside beneath the thin silky scrap of her panties.

At the first brush of his middle finger on her clit, Zoe's back arched and a jagged cry ripped from her throat, her head thrown back as an orgasm shuddered through her body. Tyler continued to work the tiny bud, rubbing his finger in a fast, tight circle until she went off again in his arms. He stroked lower, thrusting a single finger into her moist channel and curling it inside her. She was so hot. Wet and tight. The way her inner muscles clenched around his finger, she'd feel like a fucking fist gripping his cock. His vision nearly went black with the thought.

He needed to get inside her. Now.

She rode his hand, panting his name, as Tyler struggled to unzip his jeans over his aching erection one-handed without success. Realizing that wasn't going to happen, and Zoe was too close to climax to be any help, Tyler gave up on his jeans for the moment and pulled down the cup of Zoe's bra, cradling the weight of her breast in his palm and plucking the tight bud of her nipple. Zoe catapulted into another orgasm with a shattered cry, and he eased his finger from her sheath, determined to get them both out of their clothes while she was enjoying a little afterglow.

"Tyler? You in there?"

Tyler froze with his hand down the front of Zoe's jeans at the sound of his brother's voice on the other side of the door. He cursed low as Zoe's eyes met his, a spark of amusement kindling in hers. She bit her lip, a smile fighting its way past her attempts to keep a straight face. Of course *she* would think this was funny. She wasn't the one about to break the world record for bluest balls.

"Tyler?" The doorknob rattled.

Tyler's hand shot out and slammed flat against the door as it began to move behind Zoe, banging it shut before Kane could push his way inside. "What is it, Kane?" he called, then cleared his throat raggedly.

Tyler removed his other hand the rest of the way from Zoe's jeans and braced it against the door as well. She eased her legs to the floor and tucked herself back into her bra, her eyes twinkling with wicked enjoyment.

There was a moment of silence—if he didn't count the soft, panting laughter coming from Zoe—before Kane replied, "Have you seen Zoe? Landon wanted to see both of you as soon as you got her back to the ranch, but Caleb said he saw the tow truck pull in fifteen minutes ago."

"I know where she is," Tyler called through the door, choking on the last word as her fingers brushed across his fly, flicking the button open. He caught her wrist, but her fingers were hooked in his waistband and he couldn't pry them free. "This isn't funny," he whispered harshly.

One golden brow arched upward as a smile overflowing with mischief quirked her lips. "You look tense." She twisted her wrist free as Kane called through the door again.

"Can you tell her to get her ass to the Alpha's? Landon's wearing a groove in the floor with his pacing."

Tyler hissed as Zoe took hold of his zipper and began dragging it down, with one hand tucked inside his jeans to caress each inch as it was released. "Tell him she's—*Jesus*—fine." *More than fine.* The zipper had hit bottom and so had Zoe. She gripped the base of his cock with one hand and gently brushed a thumb across his glans with the other. "We'll be right there. In a—" She dragged her hand up his shaft, the slow milking pull knocking the top right off his head. "*Fuck*. In a minute."

"More like five," Zoe purred, wetting her lips until they glistened as she slid down the door to kneel at his feet. All his blood and good sense rushed south with her.

When her mouth closed over his cock and liquid suction pulled him deep, Tyler would have corrected her if he still had the powers of speech. He wasn't going to last five seconds.

As primed as he was, it was a miracle he hadn't come in his jeans before she got him unzipped. Tyler braced both palms flat on the door, focusing on the feel of the sun-warmed metal beneath his hands to distract from the smooth, moist mouth pistoning on his shaft.

"Okay, but hurry up," Kane—the brother he'd forgotten he had—called through the door. Tyler was vaguely aware of footsteps fading out of range, then Zoe did some swirling thing with her tongue and his last few brain cells evaporated.

He closed his eyes and let his head fall forward, far too heavy for his neck to support anymore. Her hands peeled his jeans down until she could cradle his balls with one hand as the other grasped his hip, holding on tight, her claw tips pressing into his skin. His own claws sank into the metal of the door, his fangs cutting the inside of his lip as he fought the urge to pump his hips and shove himself deeper.

His existence narrowed to a few square inches of flesh. He opened his eyes, hoping to distract himself from the monopoly touch had on his senses, but with his head bowed, the sight that greeted him was Zoe's golden head bobbing, plunging his ruddy, veined cock repeatedly into her mouth. He watched her take him in, eagerly swallowing every inch, humming her pleasure against his shaft. The vibration from deep in her throat thrummed up his spine, and Tyler's last shred of resistance snapped. His roar echoed off the ceiling as he came into her mouth, hips jerking with hot jets of come, his claws digging grooves in the metal door until he was wrung out, a dazed and empty shell.

Zoe released him, rocking back on her heels. She rubbed a thumb across her softly swollen lips and flashed him a bright, flirty smile. Breezy and casual, as if she hadn't just sucked him off like a fucking Hoover Energizer Bunny.

"Landon's probably given himself a stroke by now," she said as she rose gracefully to her feet. She turned away, wandering over to collect her shirt where it dangled from a fender and buckling her belt as she walked.

Tyler's brain came back online with a jolt, jarred by the easy conversation of the woman who'd just had his cock balls-deep in her mouth. It was disconcerting. He'd done casual sex before, but never with a woman who treated it so...casually.

He tucked himself back into his jeans and refastened them, feeling inexplicably irritated by Zoe's notable lack of pillow talk. She'd said *no strings*, hadn't she? So why was her stringlessness so vexing?

She pulled on her shirt, smoothing the soft, stretchy cotton over her flat stomach. "He's probably dying to tear me a new one. God knows he's been freaking out at the drop of a pin lately."

"He's responsible for a lot of people," Tyler grumbled as he crouched to grab his own shirt, untangling the twisted fabric. "You'd be stressed too."

She snorted. "That's why you don't throw yourself in the path of responsibility."

Tyler straightened, catching Zoe in the act of staring at his bare chest. He'd never thought of himself as vain, but the hungry little smile curving her lips stroked his ego.

"Has anyone ever told you how mouthwatering you are?"

Tyler considered lying just to feign modesty and continue the flirtation, but he was still annoyed enough to be truthful. "Yes."

Her eyebrows flew up and she laughed as she bent to scoop up her hat, smacking it against her thigh to dust it off. "Well, whoever she was, she had good taste." She popped the hat on her head, angling it back. "Thanks for the preview, Tyler. Can't wait to see what you can do when we have time for the feature presentation."

Tyler yanked his shirt on, stupidly bothered by her presumption that there would be a *feature presentation*, even though he knew there would be. Even frustrated with her I-got-what-I-wanted-from-you attitude, he still wanted her down to his bones. And as long as they kept it quiet...just between them...

But how could they?

Even if Kane hadn't heard them, he had to know something was up. The most tactful of Tyler's brothers, he wasn't likely to say anything—certainly not to Landon—but how many people saw Kane shouting through the garage door? How many people had seen Tyler drive onto the ranch with Zoe in the passenger seat twenty minutes ago? How was he supposed to explain the delay? They needed to get their stories straight. They needed—

"Relax, Tyler." Zoe strolled over to stand inches in front of him, resting her hands on his sides. He couldn't help thinking of the last place she'd put her hands, and his cock stirred. "Stop freaking yourself out. It's just sex. No ball and chain. I promise."

The amusement in her eyes grated even more than her cavalier dismissal. "If Landon finds out—"

"Then he finds out. Who the fuck cares? Cat shifters were horny even in Victorian times. It's in our nature. People have sex without getting married all the time. You need to learn a little *carpe diem*, Tyler. There's more to life than the shoulds."

"I think I just proved I have plenty of *carpe diem*."

"Oh? Was that you? I thought I was the one who jumped you."

"I have restraint, unlike some people. But, for the record, the jumping was mutual."

"You just keep telling yourself that, sugar. And let me know when you're ready to seize something." She ran her hands across his stomach, her eyes dark with invitation, then pivoted and strutted out the door, her gait liquid with satisfaction. The kind of walk that made sure anyone who saw her knew exactly what she'd been doing.

Tyler cursed and followed his doom out the door to the Alpha's place, hoping Landon didn't have some kind of sex radar that could tell that Tyler had just had his cock in his sister's mouth.

Chapter Four

Ava *knew*.

Zoe sat at the large round table that took up half of Landon and Ava's bungalow, convinced her sister-in-law had been shooting her funny looks ever since Tyler walked into the room. It probably didn't help that Tyler refused to sit down and kept circling back to her like he needed to mark his territory.

Ava had to know. She was too perceptive by half, though she was too diplomatic to say anything. Petite, gentle, malleable, Ava was all the things Zoe wasn't. And tonight, for the first time, her sister-in-law's quiet gaze was making her a little bit crazy. Zoe fidgeted guiltily, even though she didn't have a damn thing to feel guilty for. Tyler's paranoia must be contagious.

She'd avoided getting too close to Landon and Ava, knowing Tyler's scent would be all over her, but his behavior was effectively negating her attempts not to rub her sex life in her brother's face.

Luckily, Landon seemed oblivious to any suspicious undercurrents. He was too busy being pissed at her for trying to go into town without permission.

"Goddammit, Zoe, are you even listening to me?"

Not a bit. But she knew the gist. *Obey me, blah blah blah. Think of the pride, blah blah blah.*

She met her brother's eyes calmly. He may be the Big Bad Boss, but he hadn't been able to intimidate her since she was ten. "Don't you think I'm a little old to be called into the principal's office, Landon?"

"You aren't independent anymore," he roared. "Your actions affect more people than just you. Especially the stupid ones."

"The stupid people?" she asked with false sweetness, batting her lashes.

"Zoe." Her name was growled as a guttural reprimand, but it was Tyler's voice checking her for her impudence, not Landon's.

Zoe stiffened. You give a guy head and suddenly he thinks he owns you.

Ava shuttled a gaze back and forth between the two of them, a frown furrowing her brow.

Zoe shoved down the urge to smack Tyler, hoping to avoid further attention from Ava, and focused on her irritation with her dictatorial brother. The same brother who had touted himself as *different* from all the other dictatorial Alphas. The distraction almost worked. She barely noticed Tyler prowling the room behind her, taking up too much space with his broad shoulders and bounce-a-penny-off-it ass.

"I don't suppose you'd care to explain why you felt the need to directly disobey my order to stay on ranch lands until things had quieted down."

Zoe shrugged, leaning back in the chair. “It was a stupid order.”

“This is our home now, Zoe.” Landon’s voice was a rumbling growl, betraying how close his lion was to the surface. “You’ve made it very clear you don’t want to accept this pride as your own, but while you’re here, you’re a part of us. Protecting our family is never *stupid*.”

“It is when we don’t even know what we’re protecting against.”

“That’s no excuse for going behind my back,” Landon snarled. “You aren’t a nomad anymore, Zoe. Your actions affect all of us.”

“So do yours, dumbass! You’re the Alpha. You can’t afford to be a reactionary dipshit, jumping at shadows and imagining the boogeyman around every corner.”

Startled silence hung in the room.

Zoe had made a point never to publicly defy Landon in the year since he’d been made Alpha. The last thing he needed was his own sister undermining his authority while he was trying to find his feet as the leader. But today the only people there to hear her little rebellion were his wife and Tyler, one of his staunchest supporters. She had no doubt where Tyler’s loyalty would fall in this fight. Not that she wanted his loyalty.

“Watch yourself.” Landon swelled with an air of command, but Zoe didn’t play at subservience.

A year of obedience and biting her tongue in public hadn’t sat well. It wasn’t in her nature to keep quiet. It had only been a matter of time before she bucked his authority and asserted her independence. No time like the present. And it certainly didn’t hurt that she was still riding the hormone high of three mind-bending orgasms. She felt invincible.

Zoe bared her teeth, feeling her fangs sharpen with the tingling pinch of a partial shift.

“We don’t know what’s going on in town,” she growled. “We don’t know whether we need to be getting ready to fight or run. We can’t do damage control if we don’t know what the damage *is*. And no one is telling you to get your head out of your ass because you’re the fucking *Alpha*, and we’ve all been raised since birth to either fall in line with every damn thing the Alpha says or fight it out to take control from him, and no one wants to depose you because in all ways other than this you’ve actually been really good at this. Where’s your head, Landon? I know you aren’t this big an idiot, so why are you acting like one?” Zoe was leaning across the table as she challenged Landon. She twisted, turning her rant on Ava. “And why are you letting him? Aren’t you supposed to be the voice of reason around here?”

“I— Caution seemed—” Ava broke off, blushing so guiltily Zoe knew instantly it was Little Miss Diplomacy who had suggested the ostrich approach to begin with. And of course Landon had gone along with it. *Idiot men, getting led around by their dicks*.

“Leave her out of this,” Landon snarled, rising from his chair to loom over her, hackles high and teeth bared.

Zoe reined in her own reckless snarl, not stupid enough to tweak her brother's protectiveness toward his mate. "Landon, use your brain, I'm not going to touch Ava. I just want you to wake up."

"I am awake, but I refuse to jeopardize our home by poking a hornets' nest."

"You don't know it's a hornets' nest! You could be making everyone stir crazy and paranoid for *nothing*."

"I'd rather take that chance than risk the pride—"

"She's right."

Tyler's voice, low and filled with calm certainty, cut across their shouts. He stood, literally at her back. Even knowing he was there, she was still startled to feel his hand grip her shoulder.

Her hackles rose under his palm.

This was his definition of no strings? This was how he kept things under the radar? By interfering? By butting his nose in and playing the big man like she wasn't even capable of fighting her own battles?

"Tyler?" Ava's gaze lingered on the hand that felt like an anvil on her shoulder.

Landon took a step closer, a growl rumbling up in his throat as he faced Tyler over Zoe's head. "Are you challenging my authority?"

"Landon," Ava said, rising to her feet, her naturally husky voice calm and soothing, ready to diffuse the situation.

But Zoe was closer and she didn't do calm. She surged up to stand between Tyler and Landon—as much to shake off Tyler's lead-weight hand as anything. She knocked her brother back a step with a jab. "Get a grip, Landon. No one's challenging anyone." She turned, shoving Tyler back with a hand to his chest. "Are you?"

Warning and something more dangerous gleamed in Zoe's amber eyes as she stared him down. Though she had no goddamn excuse for being so pissed at him. He had taken her side. Trust Zoe to take offense at that.

Tyler had been on edge since they arrived at the Alpha's bungalow. He felt like a live wire, stripped of all his usual controlled insulation. He tried to stay away from Zoe, to play things casually, but his lion kept urging him to protect her, to mark her—his animal side refused to understand that she didn't belong to him. Every time Landon raised his voice to her, it was a battle not to snarl at the Alpha.

But even through the haze of his own conflicting instincts, he knew nothing in the world could make him want Landon's job.

He took a deep breath and a step back. "No," he said, continuing back as Landon stalked in the opposite direction, like prize fighters returning to their corners after a draw round. "I have no desire to be Alpha."

“See?” Zoe flung the word at Landon, doing nothing to lessen the aggression hanging thick in the air. “We’re all friends here, right?” she snarled.

Ava went to her mate and fitted herself to his side, bringing Landon back to reason with a touch. She rested her head on his chest and the tension visibly eased from his shoulders. A part of Tyler envied the mated pair’s bond. His hands itched to smooth over Zoe’s back as she nestled against him, but that was just his lion’s misdirected instincts.

“Everyone’s been on a hair trigger lately,” Ava spoke to Landon softly, “wondering when the shoe’s going to drop. Maybe Zoe has a point. It might be good to do a little reconnaissance.”

“We can’t plan until we know,” Tyler agreed. He leaned against the far wall, arms folded across his chest as a reminder to keep his hands to himself. “Someone needs to go into town—cautiously, and with your knowledge, Landon—to see whether Michael’s incident has raised any alarms.”

“Exactly,” Zoe said, mimicking Ava’s rational calm. “I’ll go into town—”

“No.” The word jumped out of his mouth without his permission. Zoe shot him a look that would have killed a lesser man on the spot. “I’ll go with Caleb and Kane.”

“I’m sorry, Tyler.” Zoe’s tone was sickening in its sweetness. “I didn’t realize you were the one making decisions. I thought that was Landon.”

“I haven’t agreed to let *anyone* go.” Landon’s mild protest cut across Tyler’s standoff with Zoe.

“But you will,” Zoe said without looking at her brother. “You won’t put your stubbornness ahead of the good of the pride. And the good of the pride means finding out what we’ve been missing in town. And you’re going to let me go, because you know I’m right. And I have more experience looking for threats than they do.” She waved toward Tyler, the gesture somehow encompassing all his brothers.

“We have more experience handling threats,” Tyler insisted.

Zoe’s spine snapped straight. “You did *not* just tell me I can’t handle threats.”

“Zoe.” Landon’s voice stopped her before she could go for Tyler’s throat. “You’ll both go. As soon as possible.” A growl rippled up Tyler’s throat, instinctive rejection of any plan putting Zoe in harm’s way calling his lion to the surface, but Landon wasn’t done issuing orders. “And you’ll take Caleb and Shana with you.”

“Shana’s insane,” Zoe groused, but the complaint didn’t have much heat since she’d just gotten her way.

“Shana goes. She can handle herself in a fight, she’s lived outside the pride, and if I try to send Caleb without her, we’ll have to lock her up to keep her from following. Just try not to kill one another until you’re back on pride land.”

“No promises.”

“Zoe.”

“Fine. I’ll play nice.” Zoe snatched up the cowboy hat she’d left on the table and started toward the door. “I guess I’ll go tell the Bitch Queen the plan.”

Tyler knew he should probably go along to referee that encounter, but he had more pressing matters—like keeping Zoe from throwing herself in front of every oncoming train. As Zoe strode to the door, shooting him one last glare he was sure he hadn’t earned, Tyler shoved away from the wall, stalking toward where his sister was still pressed up against the Alpha’s side. “Landon. A word?”

Ava went up on her toes to kiss her mate and then slipped out of his arms. “I’ll just go make sure Zoe and Shana don’t kill one another.”

Landon waited until the door shut behind Ava before he spoke, keeping his voice low even though both women should be well out of earshot. Shifter hearing was notoriously acute. “I don’t want to get in the middle of whatever is going on with you two.”

“This isn’t about that. She doesn’t need to go into town. Caleb and I are more than capable—”

“If Zoe wants to go into town, she’s going.” Landon shook his head ruefully. “I’ve never been able to control her, and I suggest you don’t try to.”

Tyler grimaced, knowing he wouldn’t be able to take that advice. Landon might not be able to control her, but God knew Zoe could use a keeper. And Tyler knew just the man for the job. If Landon wouldn’t check her, he would. For her own good.

Chapter Five

“It’s too quiet.”

“It’s a weekday.”

“It’s still too quiet.” Zoe flicked a glance around the Bar Nothing—the seedy honky-tonk where the shit had first hit the fan. It looked like the kind of place well acquainted with shit.

Shana had called dibs on investigating the town proper, hauling Caleb with her to do some shopping. Which stuck Zoe with the ass who thought he had the right to dictate her life just because she’d let him get to third base, trolling for clues at the high-class joint where Michael Minor had half-shifted defending his mate from a drunk. The Bar Nothing was filthy enough to be a health-code violation and probably a biohazard, smelled of beer and less savory things, and still managed to draw a crowd of hopeless hopefuls every weekend.

Zoe dragged a fingernail through the grime coating the chipped wood bar. “I do not understand the appeal of this place.”

Tyler shrugged, leaning one elbow against the bar at her side. She ignored the way his biceps flexed beneath his fresh shirt—she was too pissed at him to notice how mouthwatering he was right now. He’d been hulking over her protectively, shadowing her every move since they walked out of Landon’s place. And from the way he avoided looking at her, he was still pissy because he hadn’t been able to leave her home, chained to the stove.

“Beer’s cheap, music’s loud, and everyone looking to get laid comes here, male and female.”

Jealousy spiked, an unwanted jab in Zoe’s gut. “Know this from experience, do we?”

“I’ve lived twenty miles from here my whole life. So yeah, I know from experience. Doesn’t mean I’ve been here recently.”

Zoe refused to ask what qualified as *recently*. They didn’t have that kind of relationship, where they talked about past lovers. She reminded herself that she didn’t *want* that kind of relationship. Tyler Minor was just an itch to scratch.

And from the appetizer she’d gotten in the garage, he was pretty damn good at scratching.

But right now, he was the last thing she needed to be thinking about. She’d lived outside the prides long enough to know distractions could get you caught or killed.

Zoe studied their surroundings as the bartender ambled in their direction. His slow pace didn’t appear to be due to caution, just his natural rolling gait—which made no sense. Michael going part-furry was

bound to leave an impression. Tyler and Michael had drastically different coloring, but their features and build were so similar the bartender should have reacted. Caution, wariness, *something*.

If he'd been working that night. Though he seemed like the kind of guy who was a fixture in the bar, working every night. Fifty-something and heavyset with a face like a bulldog and a wedding ring embedded on one fleshy finger, he spat on the floor and folded his arms over the barrel of his chest. "Getcha somethin'?"

"Whiskey sour, please." Zoe put a little extra oomph in her smile to make up for the behemoth glaring at the world next to her.

"Bud," the behemoth grunted.

The bartender nodded, keeping the same lazy pace as he reached under the bar. Out of the corner of her eye, Zoe saw Tyler's shoulders tense then relax slightly when the bartender came up with a bottle of Jack. She knew he was remembering Michael's description of the pump shotgun that also lived underneath the scarred wood.

But her new buddy the bartender didn't seem inclined to drive them out at gunpoint. *That's a start*. He just mixed her drink, popped the top off Tyler's beer and slid them across the bar until the glass caught on a crack in the wood and stopped itself. Tyler laid a ten next to the trail of condensation. The bartender nodded to Zoe with a "Ma'am", scooped up the money, and ambled back toward the regulars shooting the shit at the opposite end of the bar.

"That was anticlimactic," Zoe commented, sipping her sour. "I expected threats and pitchforks at least."

"Maybe they only do lynchings every other day."

Zoe frowned, scanning the room and examining every drunken patron in turn. "They aren't even staring at us. Shouldn't they be staring at us?"

"I had no idea you were so vain."

Zoe glared at him. Under other circumstances she might have been amused, but right now she was concentrating on holding a grudge.

"A bunch of people live on a secluded compound outside of town and almost never leave their own land. I know this is Texas where the unofficial motto is *mind your own damn business*, but you'd think there would at least be a few whispers and stares at the possibly cultish people when we show up on their turf. So why aren't they staring?"

"I thought you'd be happy you were right." Tyler tilted the bottle for a long draught. "There's no danger here. We were wrong. The ostrich approach was unnecessary. So why aren't you celebrating?"

"I wouldn't jump right to unnecessary. There's something weird here. It's too quiet."

The Bar Nothing bordered on abandoned. The diehard drunks who filled the stools at the other end of the bar all gave them a wide berth, but Zoe's instincts told her that distance had more to do with the fact

that the two of them radiated *lovers' spat* than fear. After a month of rumors flying with no damage control, there should have been more of a reaction. Something was definitely wrong.

"I've never met a woman so reluctant to be right," Tyler bitched.

"I've never met a man so determined to be wrong all the time. I guess we're even."

Tyler bristled. "You wanna tell me what you're so pissed about?"

That was all the invitation Zoe needed. "Do I look like I need a babysitter to you?"

"You look like you need a fucking keeper, and I don't see anyone else lining up for the job."

"A *keeper*?" Zoe saw red. "Who do you think I am? All this time I thought we've been friends—or whatever you wanna call it—and you don't know me at all. I'm not a fucking damsel in distress, Tyler. I take care of myself. Always have."

"I'm sorry I dared try to protect the invincible Zoe King."

"That's your idea of an apology? God save me from alpha males."

"What do you want me to say? Go on, have fun, get yourself killed?"

"I'd be thrilled if you could say you'll trust me to look after myself and mean it, but that's probably too much to ask. You're the big bad lion, right? And I'm the helpless little kitten who needs to be wrapped in cotton for her own *protection*."

"No one could mistake you for a helpless kitten."

"No? So that isn't what you're trying to do?"

"Wanting to keep you out of harm's way isn't the same as thinking you can't handle yourself."

"Of course not. So if a bar fight started up and we were swarmed on both sides, you'd let me fend for myself?" She could practically hear crickets in the Bar Nothing today, but Zoe enjoyed the idea of her hypothetical brawl. She could do to blow off some steam. "No," she said, "we both know you wouldn't. You'd be so busy trying to defend me, you'd probably get your head split open."

"Another reason you shouldn't be here. You're a distraction."

"I'm only a distraction because you don't trust me to hold up my end. If you could just accept that I'm tough enough to take care of myself, we could be a great team, but until you do, you're going to slow me down with this *protection* nonsense."

"I'm going to slow *you* down?"

"That's what I said." Zoe polished off the last of her drink and shoved the empty glass away before swiveling on her stool to face Tyler. "You don't think I can keep up, so you slow us both down playing nursemaid to me. I know you're trying to be all noble, but the interference is a problem. And I don't need it. You can ask Landon. He never tries to take a bullet for me."

"I'm not your brother," Tyler growled, looming over her.

"No, you aren't." *And thank God for that.* "So you don't get to play big brother and boss me around."

"Big brother?" He coughed, a jagged leonine sound of irritation. "That's what you think today was?"

"I don't know what today was," Zoe snapped. "I thought it was chemistry and need and the build up to a good hard fuck, but then some asshole tried to tell me how to live my life. Even if I needed looking after, you don't have the right to protect me just because you finger fucked me and I sucked you off."

Chairs creaked at the end of the bar as the other patrons took a sudden interest in their conversation. Zoe's face flamed as she leaned toward Tyler, hissing the next words just above a whisper.

"I. Don't. Belong. To. You."

Something dark and possessive sparked in Tyler's eyes. He loomed closer, his body crowding hers aggressively. "Yes. You. *Do*."

Zoe wanted to be indignant, but her insides liquefied in a girly rush, heat pooling at her core.

"Not forever. No commitment. But as long as you are with me, you are *mine*, Zoe King. And I protect what's mine."

No one had ever said anything like that to her before, especially not with the fire of angry possession leaping in his eyes. *Wow*. Words abandoned her. Tyler bent over her, pressing his mouth against her ear, and delicious shivers chased one another down her spine.

"That's the deal you get when you take me on. So make up your mind. Do you want me or not?"

That wasn't much of a question. Right now a hard thought would tip her over into a climax. "I want you," she whispered.

"Then let's get out of here."

"Reconnaissance..." Her protest was halfhearted at best.

"Maybe Caleb and Shana found something." He guided her off the barstool with a hand on the small of her back. "And we've already found out they aren't going to lynch us on sight. That's something."

Zoe scanned the bar one last time. Now that they weren't arguing loud enough to draw an audience, the heavy drinkers at the back had stopped paying them any attention. Again, she was struck by the oddness of that. No one was even glancing in their direction. No curiosity. It was almost like the town residents thought they already knew everything there was to know about the Three Rocks Ranch.

The thought was disconcerting to say the least.

"Come on." Tyler slipped his arm around her waist, tucking her against his side. Zoe tried not to bristle when she realized he was shielding her with his body. It wasn't going to be easy, taking him on his terms, letting him protect her. But his arm felt good, so she leaned into him.

She could use the comfort. Something was very wrong here.

Chapter Six

“They’re onto us.”

Zoe had only stepped across the threshold of Landon and Ava’s place for the debriefing when Shana’s words stopped her in her tracks. The redhead had been sullenly silent the entire drive back to the ranch, but now her opening words caused a sudden uproar in the small crowd. Kane and Michael Minor were there with Ava and Landon. Shana had been the first into the room, alongside Caleb. Behind Zoe in the doorway, Tyler nudged her on the back to get her moving again, then stepped across the threshold and shut the door behind him.

“Calm down.” Landon’s voice cut across the hubbub. He waved them all toward the table, but there weren’t enough chairs, so Zoe leaned against the wall, Tyler taking a position at her side, though he didn’t touch her. “Shana, what did you see?”

Caleb folded his massive arms on the table. “She didn’t see anything.”

“Shut up, Caleb. He didn’t ask you.” Shana sent an icy glare at her mate, but considering it was her usual expression, Zoe couldn’t be sure whether she was angry with him or if this was their warped idea of foreplay.

“Did anyone say anything suspicious to you?” Landon asked, interrupting the mated pair’s staring contest.

“No,” Shana admitted.

“Were you followed? Was someone watching you?”

“No.” The redhead shook her head sharply. “Nothing like that. It wasn’t that they were suspicious of us, it was that there wasn’t even a single odd glance tossed our way. They didn’t even seem curious. After Michael wigs out in the bar and then the entire pride stops leaving the ranch for any reason for a month, any normal person would at least be curious enough to look, but they all looked at me like they already knew my secrets.”

Zoe hated to agree with Shana on anything, but in this case she had to. “That’s exactly it. They were too comfortable with us. We weren’t even interesting.” Except when she was shouting about blowjobs.

“That’s what we want, isn’t it?” Tyler pointed out. “To be below the radar?”

“We aren’t below the radar,” Shana insisted. “We’re on it. They just think they’ve already identified our dot.”

Landon looked to Zoe and arched a brow. “Zo?”

“Yeah. I agree. Someone told them something, cleared things up with some story.”

“But no one’s been off the ranch,” Kane protested.

“Are we sure about that?” Zoe countered. “I would have been to town and back again without anyone the wiser if the jeep hadn’t broken down.”

Ava shook her head. “We knew you’d gone,” she said, her soft voice a contrast to the tense tone around the table.

“And you’re positive no one else has?” Zoe asked, not wanting to voice the other possibility—that someone outside the pride had stepped in to cover their tracks. That an outsider knew enough to know *how* to cover their tracks.

Landon was obviously thinking along the same lines. He met her eyes and then his gaze slid away. “Caleb, Tyler. Can you find out if there were any other unauthorized trips?”

Without a word, Caleb and Tyler moved toward the door, purpose in every step.

Zoe kept her eyes straight ahead, refusing to watch Tyler leave, but she felt every step he took away from her. The two of them had unfinished business, but the pride came first. If there was one thing she knew about Tyler, it was that family duty trumped everything.

“Zoe?” Landon said and she refocused on him.

Reading the question in his eyes, she shook her head. “I don’t think just one of us sneaking into town could explain it, Landon. If someone covered for us, they were thorough. These people, they looked at us like every question they’d ever had about us had already been answered.”

“But not with the truth?”

“No pitchforks and lynch mobs, so I’m guessing whoever is covering our tracks can lie like the devil himself.”

“Why would they do that?” Ava asked.

Landon looked away from his mate. It was clear he didn’t want to say it, so Zoe did. “They can’t use our secret to control us if everyone knows.”

The Alpha shook his head sharply, the picture of denial. “We don’t know that—”

“Is this about that cougar in Colorado?”

All eyes flew to Shana. Zoe’s mouth went dry to have her fears voiced. “How did you hear about that?”

“What cougar in Colorado?” Ava reached blindly for Landon’s hand, not even seeming to realize she was doing it. The Alpha’s larger hand engulfed hers completely.

“It’s an urban legend,” Landon said. “A shifter boogeyman.”

Shana snorted. “It’s a rural legend, but it’s more than just myth.”

Zoe took pity on Ava and explained. “Cougars are solitary. They don’t have the protection and resources of a pride or a pack. Without anyone watching your back, it can be a lot harder to stay hidden.

There's a story of a mountain lion living in a small town in Colorado a few years back. The locals started to suspect things and he thought he was going to have to move on, but then suddenly it was like all their suspicions had been wiped away. He decided to stay, but three weeks later he vanished, never to be heard from again."

"He could have just gone into the wild."

"There was no scent trail." Shana took up the tale. "He'd been writing letters to his sister, explaining about his fears of discovery and subsequent relief at having been concerned for nothing. He'd invited her to visit and disappeared the night before her arrival. It hadn't rained. If he'd gone wild, there should have been some scent trail for her to follow after less than twenty-four hours, but there was nothing. He'd just disappeared. Everything in his cabin was as he left it. His car parked in the driveway."

"So who's the boogeyman? Who took him?"

"They say a group had arrived in town just before the suspicions around him were cleared. And they left within a day of his disappearance. I guess they were there to survey the mountain pass, but their equipment was all wrong. The townspeople just called them the scientists."

"So the scientists took the cougar?"

"His sister thinks so. She's been trying to find him for years. Trying to rally the other cougars to help her, but that breed is so independent, she hasn't had much luck."

"But even if they did take him, what makes you think this is the same group? We haven't heard about any surveyors in town, have we?"

"No. But we haven't exactly been in town a lot to hear. And someone is covering our tracks. Someone who has a vested interest in making sure no one is looking too hard at this ranch."

"We have the pride. They can't make all of us disappear."

Landon held his mate's hand between his own, but he was the one who gave her the harsh truth. "Until we know who they are and what they want, we don't know what they can and can't do."

Zoe sighed. "So I guess the ban on going into town holds?"

"Alone? Hell yes."

She cringed, but being trapped at the ranch didn't sound like the same punishment it had this morning. Tyler had changed that. She didn't want to think about what else he might have the power to change in her.

They went over the trip into town in minute detail and discussed possible strategies for learning what the townspeople thought was going on and who might have told them. Around the second hour, Shana declared herself bored with it all and left. Shortly after that, Kane and Ava slipped out, speaking quietly. Leaving Zoe alone with her brother.

Her brother who looked like he'd been through the wars. He raked a hand through hair streaked with the thousand different blonds and browns of a lion's mane, worry lines that hadn't been there a year ago creasing his familiar face.

“We could go,” Zoe said, the words slipping out of her mouth before she realized she’d thought them. “If we took off tonight—”

“Zoe.” Landon’s voice was harsh. The disappointment in his expression shamed her.

It was instinct, the urge to run with Landon when things went bad. For so many years he had been the only one she relied on—and she’d been the same for him.

Growing up depending on one another for sanity in the Florida pride, then leaving the pride as teenagers to live as nomads for years—that kind of bond was unshakeable. And it was the only reason Zoe had stuck around Three Rocks as long as she had.

Landon loved the community he’d found here, but Zoe’d never been the hearth-and-home type. She’d been fantasizing about the freedom of the road since the day they got here. But Landon had needed her, so she’d stayed. Did he really need her now? She wasn’t the only one he relied on anymore. He had a whole pride now. She wasn’t his home anymore. Ava was. Fifty lion-shifters young and old had taken up pieces of his heart that used to belong to only her.

It was stupid to be jealous of a community, but for all their solitary lifestyle, Zoe had never felt alone until she came here, where she was surrounded by people.

She turned away from the disapproval on her brother’s face, staring out the window into the black night.

She heard movement behind her, then Landon spoke from just over her shoulder. “I thought when you left today that this was it. That maybe you...”

“That I wasn’t coming back?” She’d thought of it. Too many times to count.

“You could have talked to me before stealing a jeep and breaking the rules.”

Zoe shrugged. “Easier to beg forgiveness than ask permission.”

They’d modified that saying growing up. Zoe knew he would be remembering the same words she was. Better to take your licks afterwards than get smacked for even thinking of it. At least then you get to enjoy what you’re being punished for.

Life hadn’t been fair then. Landon had reacted by becoming fixated on justice. Mr. Nobility and Equality. Zoe’s response had been more self-serving. You took care of yourself because you couldn’t count on anyone else. Except Landon. She’d always been able to count on him. Before they came here. Three Rocks had changed everything.

“You could be happy here,” Landon said softly. “If you let yourself be. This is a good place. It’s different.”

“It’s exactly the same as all the others. The only difference is you’re in charge. And how long will that last? Until someone younger and stronger walks up and kills you for the right to be Alpha? Or maybe until scientists raid the place and turn us all into lab rats?”

“I won’t let that happen.”

Some things even you can't stop, big brother.

She lowered her eyes, studying the old claw marks scarring the hardwood floor. "I can't stay here, Landon. I never planned on settling here, you know that."

"Right now..."

"I'll stay for now. Until things are stable again. I won't leave you when you need me."

His hand closed on her shoulder, tugging her away from the window and into a hug. "I'll always need you, Zo."

She smiled and pulled away. "No, you won't. The pride follows you now. You've got this. We always said you were born to be Alpha. You were going to change the world one pride at a time. And you've started something here, even if it's still rough and there are still bumps. You're going to be great whether I'm here or not. Changing the world was never really my thing."

His expression solidified like concrete setting.

Zoe forced a smile. "Come on, Landon. You know I don't fit here."

He shook his head sharply and began to pace, stalking across the floor. "You haven't tried to fit. You never gave this pride a chance. Playing dress-up in cowboy boots isn't the same thing as trying to fit in. I know you too well to believe you aren't mocking this place with those clothes."

She couldn't deny it so she joked instead. "You have a problem with the way I dress?"

Landon didn't laugh. "Give it a chance, Zoe. A real chance."

She huffed out an exasperated breath. "I don't want to. I'm not you. I'm not looking to settle down somewhere. I didn't leave our old pride because I wanted to find a better place to plant myself and pop out a few dozen cubs. I left because I felt like if I couldn't get out into the world and see a bigger piece of it, I would lose my mind. I was going crazy trapped inside that pride just like I'm going crazy trapped in this one." She gripped the edge of the table, concentrating on the feel of the wood beneath her palms so she didn't have to think about how she knew she was disappointing him. "I always wanted to be a nomad, even when it was forbidden for females to leave Twelve Oaks. I'm glad we left together, but I would have left even if you hadn't. I had to get away."

"If you could just see how a real pride feels—"

"Landon, you aren't listening. It has nothing to do with the pride. I would hate the Garden of Eden if I thought I had to stay there forever."

He stopped pacing, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "Does this have anything to do with Tyler?"

Zoe's face heated. "I'm going to pretend you didn't say that."

This wasn't about some guy. Though if she was honest with herself, Tyler was part of the reason she'd stayed as long as she had. There was something addicting about him, even when he'd been driving her crazy. She'd been enjoying the game, in a way.

“I don’t know what’s going on between you, but he might have something to say about you leaving.”

“Tyler Minor doesn’t get a say in my life,” she bit out, hating the fact that the words felt like a lie.

Chapter Seven

Tyler crouched in front of the bony, shivering teen who looked like he was one harsh word away from pissing himself. “Relax, Cory. You aren’t going to be punished,” Tyler assured him, reining in all his impatience and trying to remember what life was like at fifteen. Of course, his life at fifteen probably didn’t bear a strong resemblance to Cory Berg’s. He’d been taking care of four younger siblings, not sneaking off into town to climb a tree into a human girl’s bedroom. “We just need to know what you saw and heard in town.”

“I just went to Hailey’s and came straight back. I swear.” Cory’s teeth began to chatter, even though it had to be pushing ninety in his parents’ bungalow.

The kid was going to give himself a heart attack.

“Anything you remember can be helpful,” Tyler said, gently gripping the boy’s shoulder in what he hoped was a comfortingly paternal way. It had been a while since he’d grilled a teenager—Michael and Ava were in their twenties and beyond the need for a firm hand. Hopefully he hadn’t lost his touch.

Cory shook his head, a quick, jerky movement. “I didn’t see anybody. Honest.”

“Nothing was different? Any change, no matter how small, could be significant.”

“No. I mean, Hailey seemed more, you know, *into* me.” His eyes flicked to his parents hovering on the opposite side of the room, and his face flushed a deep red. “But I never told her a thing about the pride. I know better, Tyler. I swear, man.”

“Did she give you any idea why she was suddenly more into you?”

“Dude, I don’t know. I mean, I’m not a total idiot. I know Hailey Winters is out of my league, but when the head cheerleader asks you out, you say *yes*, you know? I didn’t want to screw things up with her just because we’d been yanked out of school and restricted to the pride land. And she never asked about the pride or coming out to the ranch until last night. I thought maybe she, like, really liked me.”

“And last night?”

“I guess it was weird, looking back now. She said something about how cool she thought it was that I lived on a federally funded secret research facility or something. I thought she was fishing so I, uh, distracted her. You know?” His eyes flicked to his parents again and Tyler would have grinned if the situation hadn’t been so serious. *Little Cory got some action.*

“You didn’t ask where she’d heard that?”

“No, I thought she was guessing—but yeah, I mean I guess she seemed pretty certain.”

A federally funded research facility. It was a convenient lie—accounting for their heightened security and secrecy. And if that was the story going through the high school, it would explain the recent increase in teenage trespass attempts.

Unfortunately they had no idea how widespread that belief was in town because their only source had been too focused on getting to second base.

“Thanks, Cory. If you think of anything else, let me know.”

“You really aren’t going to kick my ass for sneaking out?”

Tyler glanced over at Cory’s parents. His father gave a slight nod. They had disciplinary action covered. “I’m not on ass-kicking duty tonight. Maybe tomorrow.”

Tyler let himself out of the Berg bungalow and loped down the path to Landon and Ava’s place. It would have been faster to call in the information, but cell phones and radio frequencies were too vulnerable to eavesdropping, so their use was restricted on the ranch.

Tyler mounted the Alpha’s steps, checking his watch. Almost midnight, but Landon hadn’t taken the Alpha position because he wanted a lot of quiet, undisturbed nights.

Twenty minutes later, Tyler slipped out of the Alpha’s house, the weight of the day descending on him. His eyes were half closed already as he trudged through the darkened compound on autopilot. It wasn’t until he was dragging his feet up the steps that he lifted his head and realized where instinct had taken him.

He stood on Zoe’s porch, listening to the cicadas and the hum of his own midnight insanity urging him inside.

The lights were off in her house, all the windows dark. He knew he should walk away. Let her sleep, but he needed to see her, just for a minute. Then he’d be able to rest.

Tyler knocked softly, telling himself if she didn’t hear that, he would walk away.

He’d been holding Zoe at arm’s length for months. He tried to keep her from becoming important to him. The lines in his life were carefully drawn—family on one side, everyone else on the other. One mattered, one didn’t. His philosophy was simple—do anything for family, everyone else is on their own.

Zoe fell very clearly into the *everyone else* category. But on some instinctive level, a level ruled by the lion in him more than the man, he had already begun treating her like she belonged to him. Like she was part of his pride within a pride.

All this time, he’d been dreading adding another yoke of obligation to his neck, but without any conscious decision on his part, Zoe was already there. The man could fight it, but the lion knew. The animal side of him wasn’t as practiced in denial. The inevitable had happened months ago, maybe even the first day they met, but the human piece—the piece that hated change and didn’t trust easily—that part had taken a lot longer to cop to the reality.

Something had shifted today. The last of his denial falling away until he was forced to face the truth. She meant something to him. He just didn't want to think too hard about what that might be.

Tyler raised his fist to knock again when the door opened.

Zoe stood in the doorway, wearing only a faded T-shirt that fell to her hips. Suddenly the heavy feeling lifted and Tyler was wide awake. His gaze raked her from her bare toes to the golden curls tumbling around her shoulders. Arousal stirred to life.

She blinked blearily up at him, shoving a lock of hair out of her eyes. "Tyler?"

His heart stuttered. Zoe wasn't only something. Right now, she was everything. "Can I come in?"

She swung the door wider and he slipped past her into the room.

Zoe had gone to bed alone, feeling lost in the expanse of her empty bed. She'd always liked having her own space before, but tonight her cabin felt like a cavern.

She'd expected to feel a sense of freedom when she told Landon about her plans to leave. Now she could slip off whenever she wanted, as soon as the pride was secure. She'd thought it would feel like a cage springing open, but tonight she felt even more penned than ever.

Ever since leaving Landon's, she hadn't been able to think for all the restless energy running under her skin. She should have been exhausted. It was after midnight and her day hadn't exactly been uneventful, but Zoe hadn't even been able to contemplate sleep.

She'd shifted to her lioness form, hoping that would quiet the white noise cluttering her human thoughts, but her unease had shifted with her into an itch beneath her hackles, an agitation that had her pacing back and forth in her room like a feline in a zoo.

She'd heard Tyler step onto her porch and shifted back to her human figure, grabbing the nightshirt she'd discarded in an instinctive defense against what she was feeling. What he was making her feel.

As soon as she opened the door, she wished she hadn't. Tall, muscled and weary, he looked far too good standing on her porch, something dark and needy in his eyes. Her soul felt like it was trying to reach out to him through her skin. She told herself it was just her animal side's need for the reassurance of touch, but the words felt like a lie.

When he squeezed past her into the cabin's single open room, the scent of him teased her, inviting her to press her face against his neck and breathe, urging her to rub against him until their scents were tangled around one another and everyone who came near him would know who he belonged to.

Zoe shut the door, pausing to stare at the worn wood until she could evict that instinct from her thoughts. Even her feline side wasn't usually possessive. She didn't need to mark her lovers and resisted all their attempts to mark her, so why couldn't she stop imagining branding Tyler Minor with her scent?

“Nice,” he commented behind her, and Zoe turned, realizing as she did that he’d never been inside her place before. He was careful about boundaries, careful never to be alone with her anywhere there was a bed handy.

Zoe’s gaze slid to the large, low mattress, the only piece of furniture in the room. The austere lack of furnishings and decorations weren’t really her style, but she’d never seen the point in making a place feel homey if it wasn’t going to be her home.

Now the lack made her uncomfortable. Watching Tyler survey her bare walls and impersonal furnishings, she wished she’d bothered to do something with the place. At least it was dark. He couldn’t see much. Maybe he’d just think it was charmingly minimal without the light to show it was barren.

Not that it mattered what he thought. She refused to let it matter. He was just a guy. This was just a house. Shelter and nothing more. It filled a need. Just like he did. A physical need. Zoe took care of her own emotional wants.

Those emotional wants had nothing to do with the need to touch Tyler that burned under her skin. Nothing.

She didn’t know why he was here. To finish what they’d started in the garage? To fight about her tendency to speak for herself rather than play the meek little woman? There was a restlessness in him that matched her own, but she didn’t know how to soothe it. She wasn’t the soothing type.

Zoe opened her mouth to ask him why he’d come, what he wanted from her, but didn’t get a syllable out before he answered both questions in a way that left no doubt in her mind.

Tyler crossed the distance between them in two long strides, speared his fingers into her hair, cupped the back of her head and sealed his lips over hers in a searing, toe-curling kiss.

This afternoon had been about heat and chemistry and impersonal lust, but this was something else. The intensity in his touch, the raw, almost desperate way he held her, as if at any second she could be pulled from his grasp. This felt personal.

Zoe clutched his arms, using him as the only fixed point in her existence as the world seemed to melt beneath her feet like a Dali painting.

Her hands found his shirt—once as neat as the man himself and now hopelessly wrinkled by the day. Zoe had always marveled that a man who spent his days rolling around under cars could look so put together, but now she couldn’t think about his pristine façade. She just wanted to peel away the last traces of civility.

She fisted her hands in the fabric and backed toward her bed, dragging him with her until her calves hit the mattress. She knelt on the bed and knee-walked back, pulling him forward with fistfuls of shirt, never breaking the hungry kiss. Tyler leaned over the bed, propping his fists on the mattress as he pressed her back to sit on her heels as he explored every corner of her mouth. As decadent as the kiss was, as

complete and deliberate, it wasn't enough. She couldn't get to the good stuff fast enough. Zoe had never been the patient type.

Hoping to spur Tyler to speed things up, Zoe dropped his shirt and grabbed the hem of her own, breaking the kiss long enough to whip it over her head and fling it away. Tyler groaned, his hands going instantly to the full curves of her breasts. Zoe put her own hands over his, holding them to her as she lay back on the bed.

Tyler eased down on top of her, still fully clothed, his head level with her breasts. He plumped and shaped them, grazing his lips over them too gently to satisfy her craving for *fast* and *hard*. Sensation escalated with each teasing touch. She raised her knees, bracketing his waist between them, and threaded her fingers through the golden mane of his hair. Half of her wanted to press him close and demand he get a damn move on, but the other half hesitated, enjoying the slow, intimate pace he was setting. Zoe let her head fall back to the mattress, closing her eyes, and gave herself up to the deliberate, tender seduction of his touch.

He worshipped her body with his mouth and hands, taking nothing for himself and yet taking all of her, more than she'd ever allowed anyone else. Her prized distance was falling away with each caress. Zoe squirmed beneath him, uneasy from the mix of desire and intimacy, writhing with the discomfort of this foreign vulnerability. But she didn't stop him. She didn't know if she could.

It was all in her head. She was imagining the tenderness in his kiss—the idea that it meant anything more than a satisfactory release was a fantasy of her own making. And as long as he didn't notice her preoccupation, she was still safe, the most vulnerable places in her soul still hidden, even as he managed to stroke them.

But some of her unease must have communicated itself to him. Tyler braced himself on his elbows and looked down into her face, his gaze dark with hunger but penetrating. “You okay?”

Panic shot through her bloodstream. She hauled him down for a forceful kiss to avoid answering the question. She wasn't okay. She was too exposed, but she couldn't let him see. Tyler let her kiss him, calming her with the dragging strokes of his tongue even as she tried to amp him up until he wouldn't try to peer into her soul anymore.

Then he pulled back and frowned down at her. “Zoe,” he said softly, her name a gentle scold, as if she should know better than to evade him.

Why couldn't he just be a guy and play through without paying attention to whether she was with him?

“I'm good.” The words sounded forced, too rushed, and Zoe winced internally at the crack they exposed. *Distract him*. She stroked her hands down the corded strength of his neck and pushed open the collar of his shirt. “Why are you wearing so many clothes?” she purred, half-veiling her eyes behind her lashes.

Suspicion flickered in his eyes—*why did he have to see so much?*—but then Tyler grinned. “Clearly an oversight.”

He rolled away from her to take care of the clothes issue, and Zoe sat up, turning her back on him to collect herself.

What was wrong with her? This was what she wanted, wasn't it? What she'd wanted for months. So why did it feel like she was getting more than she'd bargained for? She tried to remember what comfortable flirtation felt like.

She needed to get control of the situation. She wasn't a fainting virgin or the kind of girl who assigned nonexistent significance to sex. She was a predatory cat, not the meek, sheltered prey. *Get a grip, Zoe.*

She turned back to Tyler, her breathing quickening at the sight of his golden, muscular body wrapped only in moonlight and shadows. His cock rose between them, swelling further as she watched, in silent invitation. A feline smile curled her lips. She crawled across the bed and knelt on the edge, feeling a surge of power and control at the way his gaze tracked her every move.

“C'mere,” she demanded. He obeyed instantly and she felt every step he took toward her like a magnet being drawn toward its match. By the time he was within a foot of her, the press of his skin against hers was inevitable, a scientific law.

She twined her arms around his neck and hauled him to her for a kiss, but this time it wasn't desperate and defensive. This time it was pure, sweet need. Clean, simple lust. She burned.

Tyler responded with gratifying ferocity. He bore her back to the mattress, the scalding heat of his bare skin making her feel like she'd been dropped into a furnace, inside and out. They fell in a tangle, but he found his way naturally between her thighs. He kissed her deeply, slicking a finger between her folds until she was twisting beneath him with pent-up desire. “Tyler,” she groaned, “now, *please.*”

At her plea, Tyler's vexing patience evaporated. He tugged her hips down the mattress until she was tucked beneath him at just the right angle. Thrusting into her, he filled her in one deep, smooth stroke. Zoe clenched her inner muscles, her breathing reduced to ragged gasps. He took up a steady rhythm, muscles clenched with the effort, sweat slicking the muscles of his back as she clutched them.

That caged feeling was back, but this time she knew exactly how to find the release she needed. Digging her heels into the mattress, Zoe canted her hips and moaned, “*Harder,*” into Tyler's ear, her lips caressing the lobe. Tyler grunted an unintelligible reply and his hips began pistoning faster, intensifying the delicious drag of each withdrawal and jarring spike of pleasure at every pounding return.

Her orgasm built like the electric tingles in the air before a storm, an ominous anticipation. Zoe twisted her face away from Tyler, pressing her cheek into the mattress, startled by how cool the sheet felt against her skin. She squeezed her eyes shut, focusing every particle of her being on the storm rising inside her.

But then Tyler's lips caressed her jaw, his fingers cradled her face. There was a roughness, almost a violence in their mating, but his touch was so gentle, so damn tender, she couldn't resist it when he turned her face back to his for a startlingly chaste kiss.

Her climax burst through her, not like a storm, but like the sudden radiance of the dawn, light spilling through her. She opened her eyes, startled by the sweetness of it, and his gold gaze was directly above her. Eyes like the sun bore into hers, illuminating every corner of her being, and she flew. *This is the freedom I've been missing.* Tyler roared, his claws digging furrows into the mattress as his own release took him, but the sunrise in his eyes never wavered from hers as aftershocks in pinkish hues sent pleasure down to her bones.

Zoe wrapped her arms around Tyler and pulled him over her, loving his weight pressing her down into the mattress, but also needing his cheek beside hers so he couldn't look into her eyes right now. She felt...disoriented, like some small piece inside her had shifted, changing its purpose, and all the rest of her had to figure out how to operate around the change.

She couldn't face him right now. *God, please don't let him try to pillow talk me.* Zoe closed her eyes and let the muscles in her arms loosen, falling lax and slipping off his shoulders. She made the rest of her body boneless and gave a soft, breathy sigh. Feigning sleep wasn't the most mature approach to handling the aftermath, but the alternative was too intimidating.

Tyler lifted his weight away from her and she fancied she could feel his gaze on her, checking to see if she really slept. She kept her breathing even and her body still—which would have been a warning sign if he knew her, since Zoe was a distinctly restless sleeper.

She half-wondered if he would leave—just slip out as no strings seemed to imply—but Tyler settled himself against her, one strong arm wrapped around her ribs beneath her breasts. He pressed along her right side and her body quickened for him, but Zoe forced herself to remain still.

She focused on the deep in and out of her breath, concentrating on the details of the lie, until the exhaustion of the day aided her and she slipped off into a genuine slumber with the scent of Tyler Minor and the feel of his strength surrounding her.

Chapter Eight

Tyler couldn't sleep.

The lithe lioness curled against his side consumed his thoughts, keeping him awake even though it had to be nearing five in the morning. His body felt heavy and dull even as his mind buzzed like a hornets' nest.

He shouldn't have come here tonight. It was the final nail in the coffin of his unfettered lifestyle. But even knowing that, he couldn't regret it. He wouldn't have traded the last twenty-four hours for anything, but that didn't mean he was ready to surrender just yet.

He'd had twenty years of responsibility. Twenty years envisioning the day he would walk off the pride lands with no one depending on him but himself.

Ava and Michael had been so tiny when their father left and their mother withered into a shell of herself. They'd needed him so badly. Kane had gone from being a bright, quick-to-laugh kid to a quiet, solemn teen almost overnight. Caleb had always been more withdrawn, always so self-reliant. Shana, obnoxious as the rest of the world found her, had kept Caleb from pulling too deeply into his own reserve, but he'd still looked to Tyler for guidance. For strength. They all looked to him. So he'd learned to be the man they needed him to be.

When Kane's sexual preference had become apparent, Tyler had kicked the shit out of anyone who dared suggest he ought to be sent off as a nomad, as some prides liked to do with their so-called *deviants*. When Ava was picked on for her diminutive size, he made sure anyone who touched her knew they were taking on the entire Minor clan. And when the bastard Alpha who'd ruled before Landon had threatened to geld Michael to help him control his erratic shifting, Tyler had promised to repeat the procedure on the Alpha himself if he dared touch his baby brother.

For twenty years he'd been their champion. His responsibility for them had defined him, but now they didn't need him anymore.

Ava, for all her diminutive size, had learned diplomacy and developed a quiet strength of character that had won her the love and respect of the Alpha himself. No one would ever dare harm her again.

Caleb and Shana had finally managed to find the middle ground in the constant battle that had been their decades-long, on-again-off-again affair. Recently, his most reticent brother seemed happy in a way Tyler had never seen him before.

Michael, too, had found love and a sense of peace—though he still couldn't contain his shifting. Logical, pragmatic Mara was the last person Tyler would have expected an impulsive, willful soul like Michael to love, but she grounded him in a way Tyler had never been able to do, no matter how he'd tried to help.

Independent Kane had carved out his own happiness. Under Landon's rule, Kane and his partner Tom weren't just grudgingly tolerated, they were actively accepted by the rest of the pride. With Tom, Kane's laughter had returned, lightening his solemnity.

And now...Zoe. It was a romantic epidemic.

But he wasn't ready to join the ranks of happily-ever-afters.

She was his—that question had been decided already. If tonight had proved anything, it was that Zoe was inevitable.

Just another example of the universe yanking choice out of his life.

He needed a little time to come to terms with tying himself to her forever. And it *would* be forever. No strings just wasn't going to happen.

Tyler rolled silently out of bed, the lion's instinctive need to stay with her warring with his all-too-human wariness of commitment. Wariness won.

Finding his clothing in the dark seemed an impossible task, so Tyler shifted to his feline form, the feel of his fur a comfort to his restless thoughts, though the senseless circles of his reservations chasing one another around his mind were no quieter in this form.

He padded quietly to the door and nosed it open, batting it shut behind him with the flat of his paw, the well-oiled hinges never making a sound. He leapt off the porch, concentrating on the bunch and spring of his muscles and the feel of the earth beneath his paws as he landed. He wove through the compound, paws silent on the dusty ground. The garage loomed unlit in the darkness, a black box against the starry sky.

He'd locked it behind him earlier and his keys were back with his clothes, but he'd left his "back door" open. He circled the building to the rear where the loft window was open wide, high above the ground.

Gathering himself, Tyler crouched and sprang to the roof of the nearby parts shed. The corrugated metal rang dully like a muted tuning fork even though he tried to land softly. From there he leapt into the oak tree that shaded the area, timber groaning and creaking ominously under his weight. Lions were among the heaviest cats and the high branches bowed and cracked as he ran lightly across them and launched himself across the space to the open window.

He tucked his body tight, trying for an aerodynamic grace that his bulky cat form naturally lacked. His front legs and shoulders made it through the open window, but the ledge caught him hard on the ribs and

his back paws scrabbled against the exterior siding for purchase. He muscled his hindquarters through the window and flopped onto his belly on the cement floor of the loft, panting softly.

Not the best secret entrance, but the height of the window discouraged the cubs from trying it.

Tyler shifted back to a form with opposable thumbs and pulled on the spare coveralls he kept stashed in the loft. His bare feet were silent on the metal stairs leading down to the garage bay.

The world made more sense when he was elbow-deep in engine parts.

The shop had always been his refuge. He could take something run down and cast aside and bring it back to life. He could keep everything moving smoothly, all the pieces interacting together just as they should. There was justice in that, satisfaction and worth.

Tyler knelt next to the engine he was rebuilding, and his brain fell into silence as he concentrated on his task.

The other side of the bed was empty and cool when Zoe woke. With the first few rays of dawn streaming in through her window, her fears of the night before seemed ridiculous.

They'd had sex. Nothing earth shattering in that. For the life of her she couldn't think why she'd been so paranoid. Why she'd been so stupidly convinced they wouldn't be able to keep things no strings.

Zoe rolled out of bed and grabbed a pair of jeans and her snug *Bigger in Texas* T-shirt, propelled by the urge to talk to Tyler. She wanted to smooth thing over with him and make sure they were still on the same page. Make sure he hadn't read anything—accurately—into her awkwardness the night before.

She hurried down her porch steps, following the scent trail Tyler had left. She was so tuned to his scent, she probably could have found him even after a rainfall, but the morning was dry and hot, the sun already gearing up for an early summer scorcher, and his scent remained fresh.

She wove between the buildings, grateful there was no one about this early to see her. The garage bays were all closed when she arrived, the main door locked, but his scent circled the building before disappearing and there wasn't another trail leaving. He had to be in there.

"Tyler?" Zoe called, tapping on the metal door. She smoothed her palms over her hips and fidgeted, agitation bubbling up inside her.

This was stupid. For all she knew he was sleeping in there. She'd seen a cot in the loft. That didn't explain why he would have gone to the garage rather than back to his own place...unless he was trying to avoid her. He'd expect her to check his place first, wouldn't he? Was he hiding from her?

Zoe hated this insecurity. She felt like such a *girl*. She reminded herself that she was here only to make sure he knew they were still no strings.

Which, now that she thought about it, was a really freaking stupid reason to be here. Dammit. What had she been thinking?

She took a step back, pivoting on her heel, when the door creaked open behind her. "Zoe?"

Shit. She turned back, a fake smile plastered on her face. “Tyler. Hey.”

“Were you looking for me?”

Yes, because I was being a total freaking moron. “Yeah, I...” *Shit.* She needed a reason to be looking for him. What the hell kind of reason could she make up?

“Is this about the clothes?” he asked. “I was going to come back for them. I just needed to work on some stuff.”

For the first time, Zoe noticed he was wearing a pair of greasy grey coveralls open to the waist rather than the clothes he’d worn to her place. She hadn’t even noticed that he’d left them behind. She latched onto his excuse eagerly. “Yeah. Your clothes. But you look like, you know, you found some.”

And damn if the man didn’t look edible in the uniform of his trade. The shapeless coveralls seemed to accentuate the breadth of his shoulders and the large, capable size of his hands. Hands that had been all over her body only hours ago.

“You wanna come in? I’m about done here.”

Did she want to come in? Why did that question seem like the Riddle of the Sphinx? This was a casual visit, right? She wasn’t asking for strings if she accepted his invitation to go into the garage. The garage where they’d hooked up only yesterday—but also where they had first discussed the no-strings plan. There wasn’t anything hidden in his invitation. He was a guy, for fuck’s sake. They didn’t see the minefields in conversations that chicks planted there. They could still talk without having it complicate their sexual relationship, couldn’t they?

“Zoe?”

Oh, Jesus. She’d been standing there gaping at him. “Yeah. Yeah, sure. I’ll come in.”

Tyler opened the door wider and she slipped past him, reminded of when she’d let him into her place only hours earlier. But if she hadn’t put her mark on her house, the garage was all Tyler. His scent saturated every surface, but even more than that, the neat efficiency and small, personalized touches made it a space that was uniquely him.

“How long have you been the pride mechanic?” she heard herself asking, even though she’d sworn she would keep things light and impersonal.

“Seventeen years.” Tyler wandered over to a sturdy table where a mass of unidentifiable metal cluttered the surface. She trailed along behind, careful not to touch anything.

“You never met Tobias,” Tyler commented as he picked up a piece and adjusted it in some mysterious way. “Cranky bastard. He was my mentor, taught me everything he knew about cars and then sent me to trade schools to learn more. He used to run the garage, even when he could barely lift a wrench anymore, but he retired when I was eighteen and handed it all over to me. He died...I guess it was five years ago now.”

“I’m sorry.”

“He was eighty-six years old and he died with the help of a box of Viagra.” Tyler grinned fondly. “I wouldn’t be too sorry.”

“Eighteen’s pretty young to be responsible for keeping the whole pride in wheels.”

He grimaced. “One thing I’m used to, it’s responsibility. You deal with it. No one else is going to.”

Zoe shoved her hands in her pockets, knowing she shouldn’t ask the next question if she wanted to keep them impersonal, but driven by a need to know. “Ava said you pretty much raised her and your brothers.”

Tyler grunted. “No one else was going to,” he repeated, but something cold had crept into his voice. “Our father left and our mother was useless.”

“My sire was banished too.” Zoe scuffed her toe over an old oil stain on the cement floor. “I don’t really remember him.” She’d been raised more as part of the pride litter than by her actual parents, but with Landon as her partner in crime she hadn’t felt bruised by the lack.

“Our father wasn’t banished. He left,” Tyler said harshly. “Just decided he didn’t want his responsibilities anymore and walked away. Headed for greener pastures.”

Zoe struggled for something to say that wouldn’t sound patronizing. *He would be proud of you?* Because how could he not be? Tyler was an amazing man. He was tempered steel tested by a lifetime of burdens. He was the man every father hoped his son would be, but she didn’t think saying that would help. She didn’t want to imply that Tyler needed his father’s approval. He was better than that.

And besides, who was she to talk? She avoided responsibilities like the plague and she was an old hand at greener pastures. She knew better than most that they were almost never green.

Arriving in a new pride wasn’t easy as a nomad. She and Landon had visited their share in their years of wandering before they’d come to Three Rocks.

Zoe cleared her throat self-consciously. “Can I ask you something?”

Tyler shrugged consent, his focus centered on the parts in his hands.

“That first day, when Landon and I arrived here at Three Rocks. The old Alpha Leonus and his thug Kato tried to gang up on Landon, but you didn’t let them. I would have fought with him. I remember how surprised I was when I didn’t even have to shift. But Leonus was even more surprised than I was when you stepped in, like you’d never interfered before. I’ve always wondered why you didn’t. And why, that day, you did.”

Tyler’s hands stilled on the engine components. “Why do you ask?”

Because that was the moment I started falling in love with you.

She shook her head, in denial of the thought. This wasn’t love. She wouldn’t let it be. She hadn’t needed a hero then, but having him step in with his armor shining had linked them somehow.

“I have a theory about why you didn’t,” she said. “Landon’s always had big sweeping ideas of changing the whole world, but you strike me as more focused. Ava... Michael... You only fight personal

battles. I think Leonus was betting on you not lifting a finger for a stranger, but for some reason that wasn't a good bet." Zoe wet her lips, unaccountably nervous. "I guess I was just wondering if that reason had anything to do with me."

She was able to ask only because he wasn't looking at her. When he raised his eyes to hers, the words turned to sawdust in her mouth.

"Doesn't that make me less noble? If I wasn't doing it for the justice of it, but only to get laid?" Tyler slowly advanced on her, and Zoe found her feet retreating without any direction from her brain.

"But you didn't get laid. If you were only doing it so I'd feel indebted to you, why didn't you ever come to collect?"

"Isn't that what I did last night?"

"You waited over a year to claim your prize? I don't think so." Her back bumped against an SUV with the side paneling shredded by some lion's claws.

Tyler kept advancing until his chest brushed hers, using his superior height to loom over her in that way that never failed to make her internal organs melt like butter.

"Why, Tyler?"

He bowed his head and buried his nose in her hair, inhaling deeply next to her ear and then whispering the words into it. "I didn't want you to get hurt." He rested his hands on the SUV on either side of her so his forearms brushed the sides of her waist. "I've had this compulsion to protect you since the second you walked through that gate."

"I don't need you to protect me."

"I need to. You belong to me, Zoe. And you drive me mad when you put yourself at risk. I thought I could control it. I thought if I didn't give in to it that I would stop wanting to claim you, but it never worked."

Her breathing accelerated, fueled by the mix of arousal and panic his words inspired. "I don't want a protector."

"Tough," he growled against her ear, his body leaning into hers until she could feel his strength pressing her back into the door panel. "We don't always get what we want. I wanted to be free of my obligations and leave here for good, but I stopped thinking that way the second I realized you were mine to protect."

"You can't have it both ways," she said, her argument slightly less effective due to the breathy gasps that were all she could manage with his hands sneaking under her shirt to her braless breasts beneath. "You can't be both the big, strong protector and the no-strings lover. It doesn't work that way."

He lifted her, guiding her legs around his hips and pinning her hard against the SUV. "We both know no strings was never an option."

His mouth slammed down on hers, driving any protest she might have made out of her mind. He consumed her with the kiss. He shrugged out of his coveralls, and Zoe lowered her legs long enough to help the stiff cloth drop to his ankles. As he kicked it off, she quickly stripped out of her own jeans and T-shirt. Then he fell back on her in a hungry frenzy. His hands were filthy with engine grease, but Zoe didn't care. She wanted them on her everywhere, smearing tracks of dark grease across her skin.

Tyler was forceful, commanding. He spun her away from the side door and bent her over the table he'd been working at earlier, her ass raised like a gift. He nudged her feet wider and stroked a calloused hand over the curve of her buttocks as Zoe gripped the table for balance. She felt his thick cock probing at her entrance, impossibly hot like all the heat in his body was being redirected there, and then he plunged inside and she screamed raggedly as sensation ratcheted to an unbearable pitch, her cries echoing hollowly in the garage bay.

He drove into her again and again, hard enough that the heavy table began scraping across the floor with each pounding thrust. Zoe held on tight, aware of nothing but the knot of pleasure building in her blood. Tyler reached around and found the heart of the knot, rotating a single finger on her clit. The knot unraveled like a slingshot, flinging her into the stratosphere as her climax shook her body, and Tyler rammed into her one last time, holding tight and deep as he came hard inside her.

As she floated back to her body, Zoe concentrated on the sound of their uneven breathing. Everything else was too big, too much to contemplate.

Whatever this thing was between them, it had just gotten a hell of a lot more complicated.

Chapter Nine

Zoe snuck into the back of the mess hall, hoping to go unnoticed at Landon's mandatory defense summit. Flying under the radar wasn't something she had much experience with, but she'd been practicing it diligently for the last forty-eight hours. Ever since Tyler tossed no-strings out the window.

She'd fled the garage, throwing some lame excuse she couldn't even remember over her shoulder. Tyler hadn't stopped her, either smart enough to know she needed space or cocky enough to be certain she was coming back.

The world felt like it was squeezing in around her like a vacuum pack, sucking all the oxygen out of her lungs. She'd needed some breathing room. Some time to evaluate. Just a few minutes when her hormones weren't running on overdrive and insisting she absolutely must stay with that walking aphrodisiac of a lion. She couldn't think when she was with him.

Unfortunately, after two days apart from him, she was no closer to knowing what she wanted.

She'd avoided Landon, Ava, the entire Minor family, but especially Tyler. She knew what *he* wanted—what they all wanted. For her to decide she really did want to settle down.

Settle. The word tasted like rust on her tongue. If she stayed here, she'd be close to Landon and Ava. She'd have Tyler, and probably a few cubs and an extra thirty pounds of baby weight she couldn't shed.

She'd be domesticated. A house cat.

The thought made her physically ill, so much so she'd actually considered going to the pride doc and asking him to give her a pregnancy test even though she *couldn't* be pregnant without going into her heat cycle. Wouldn't that be just her luck? If Tyler knocked her up, there'd be no denying him.

She didn't want her claws pulled. She could handle it for a little while—being surrounded by people you cared for wasn't exactly torture—but eventually the wanderlust that was so deeply embedded in her soul would start pressing against her heart again, begging for an outlet. Independence. Freedom. Adventure. Would her soul just wither and die without them? Could she be a house cat? And on the other side, could she even make herself leave Tyler?

He already felt like the cornerstone to the foundation of her happiness, like it would all crumble without him. But was he too grounded? He might profess to want to leave the pride and see the world, but he would never be able to leave his family. His siblings meant too much to him. And knowing what she now did about his father, she knew he would never let himself be the kind of man who abandoned those he

loved. Tyler was even more caged than she was here at Three Rocks. But if she put herself in that cage with him, would they soothe one another or rip each other to pieces?

Zoe shuffled along the back of the room filled with every able-bodied adult in the pride. She didn't need to scan the room for Tyler. She spotted him right away, leaning against the base of the stage they never used. Landon stood on it now, Ava at his side, the Minor siblings and their mates arrayed at his feet. Zoe felt a twinge of guilt that she wasn't up there with them, presenting a united front, but that would only reinforce the illusion that she was part of this pride, and she wasn't. Not really. *Not yet*, a small voice whispered in her mind.

The mess hall was crowded. Meals were communal but rarely attended by all pride members simultaneously. Full-pride gatherings, like the ritual hunts, usually took place in the amphitheatre on the edge of the compound. Holding the meeting here was doubtless an attempt to keep the cubs from listening in, but Zoe would bet there was a cluster of small, furry ears pressed to the walls outside, trying to pick out stray words through the timbers. Curiosity was a feline trait, after all.

Landon raised his hands above his head, and the rumble of conversation in the hall instantly quieted. Zoe realized she was holding her breath and forced herself to let it out. Whatever they'd discovered in the last couple days, it couldn't be good, judging by the grim set of her brother's jaw.

Guilt jabbed again. She should have been with them. She should have been on the front lines, investigating and planning, but instead she'd been hiding. Taking care of herself first, like a true nomad outside a pride. So why did she feel like she'd done something wrong?

Landon cleared his throat and tipped his head back in his master-orator mode, projecting the charisma that made him a natural leader. "Since the incident at the Bar Nothing, a trio arrived in town, claiming to be government research scientists investigating the geological properties of this land. Two men and one woman, young by all accounts, they have been telling the town that we are operating under a similar government research grant, but that our funding is set to expire soon and they will be taking over the ranch when it does."

Sounds of unease momentarily rose, cutting Landon off until he raised his hands again for quiet.

"We haven't been able to determine yet where these so-called geologists are staying, though it is somewhere outside of town, and we have no way of knowing if there are more than just the three who've been seen by the townspeople. We don't know what they know about us. This could be nothing more than a misunderstanding. At this point, until we know more, our best strategy is to be always on guard defensively. Patrols will be doubled and run in pairs who will be in constant radio contact with the central security team. We'll be working to upgrade the sensors at the perimeter as quickly as possible, as well as beefing up security around the cubs. In the meantime, stay close to the compound, try to avoid going anywhere alone and report anything suspicious, no matter how insignificant it may seem."

Ava slipped her hand into Landon's, and the anxious tension in his shoulders seemed somehow to shift into a sense of power and strength.

"With luck we'll be able to face our enemy directly soon." A predatory growl rose through the room. Landon bared his teeth, nodding as if satisfied by the bloodthirsty response. "We will win this hunt. Until then, come up and get your new security assignments."

Zoe wrapped her arms around her stomach as the shifters in the room stood and shuffled toward the pride leaders to collect their new duty rosters. There was a sense of solidarity as the pride banded together to face the common enemy. Zoe knew she should feel motivated and a swell of camaraderie with her fellow lions, but all she felt was the intense urge to leave.

Lions rarely hunted alone, but Zoe wanted nothing more than to leave the group behind and go hunting, to test the sharpness of her claws against the flesh of those who threatened them.

The line to get assignments would take a while to clear out. Zoe slipped out the side door, striding quickly away from the building. She would talk to Landon later about whatever he wanted her to do. Now the lioness stirred restlessly within her, scratching to be let out. Zoe stretched her stride, loping down the path toward her place.

"Running away?"

The deep voice behind her brought her up short. Zoe paused, unfamiliar indecision slithering through her. Turn and face him? Or run like hell?

"It's a lot for me to adjust to too," Tyler said, closer this time.

Zoe turned. "It?"

Damn, he looked good. The sight of him so close was a salve to an ache she hadn't known she had. Tall and strong, a golden god gazing down at her with an expression of such possession it should have had her sprinting in the opposite direction, but all she wanted to do was throw herself against him.

"Taking a mate," he said. "It's a big adjustment for both of us."

Her breath left her in a whoosh. "Who said I was taking a mate?" *Presumptuous bastard.*

"Zoe."

"Tyler," she mimicked, a growl sneaking into her voice. "Before you grab a shotgun and start wedding planning, maybe you should check to see if the bride is willing."

"This isn't exactly how I pictured my life going either," he said, the words sharp.

"Oh, well done. That's the way to convince me we should get married. Bitch about how I'm screwing up your life plan. Bonus."

"That wasn't what I meant and you know it. We're both stuck in this, so we might as well—"

"I'm not stuck in anything, Tyler Minor. So you can just cram your *make the best of it* speech up your ass, okay, sweetie?"

“Dammit, Zoe! What did I do to get you so pissed at me? I thought we were good and then you bolt on me with no fucking explanation and avoid me for days. What did I fucking *do*?”

You wanted me. Zoe knew it was messed up, but him wanting her had scared the shit out of her. She was allowed to pin all her emotion on him when he was running hard in the opposite direction, but she hadn’t been prepared for his about-face. When he wanted her, when it was real and she had to choose between a real life with him here and the life she knew on her own, suddenly everything she felt was bigger and scarier than she could handle.

But she couldn’t tell him that.

“You didn’t do anything. What do you want?”

His jaw locked and his hands fisted at his sides, but he lowered his eyes, visibly restraining himself from the urge to dominate her. Zoe was more impressed than she cared to admit by the effort.

“Landon wants you to take a look at the perimeter security. You know more about that techno-spy shit than anyone else on the ranch. I’m supposed to escort you.”

“Babysit me, you mean. I can do it myself. I’ll be on pride land the entire time.”

“You’ll be on the border and *everyone* is using the buddy system, so stop whining and get any gear you need. We’re going as soon as you’re ready.”

Zoe stiffened, itching for a fight, wanting to take out all of her frustration and confusion on someone. “Is that an order?”

Tyler stepped forward until he was looming over her, but he didn’t touch her, just saturated the air around her with the weight of his presence. “Zoe,” he growled low. “We can play all the dominance games you want later, but right now you have a job to do for the pride, so get your ass moving and fucking *do it*.”

If she’d needed it spelled out for her that his family would always come first to him, Tyler had just done that. Pride first—even if his definition of pride was narrower than Landon’s. Zoe didn’t want to be another person he protected and bossed around. It wasn’t in her.

Suddenly the picket fence looked more like bars. He would keep her safe, even if it meant building a cage around her with his own two hands. The two of them chafing against their restriction together she might have been able to handle. Tyler as her jailer would be unbearable.

“I’ll get my things,” Zoe said, her voice soft and expressionless.

Tyler rocked back on his heels, a flicker of satisfaction at the victory showing on his face. Zoe didn’t bother telling him he’d lost something bigger than this argument. He’d lost her.

“Three more and we’re done.”

The truck rumbled over the cattle guard fifteen feet from the outer perimeter. Zoe sat in the passenger seat with a laptop open on her legs, ignoring him with a businesslike concentration that was starting to make him crazy.

For days he'd tried to give her space, even as his lion fought against the restriction, urging him to prove to her he was strong enough to be her mate the only way the animal in him recognized—through dominance. He'd nearly ripped Landon's head off for no good reason, just because he was another male in Zoe's life and Tyler couldn't stand the idea of anyone else having a claim on her. His human side refused to be ruled by his instincts. He knew Zoe would be as resistant to the idea of spending forever with him as he initially had been, but she didn't have decades of bending to Fate's will to prepare her as he did.

Strangely, the more time he'd given her, the more certain he'd become that he didn't need any more. The more she'd resisted, the faster he'd adjusted. He would never find anyone else who suited him the way Zoe did. It was her or no one, and now that he'd been with her, no one wasn't an option anymore.

But her rigid silence in the passenger seat couldn't be classified as encouraging.

They'd been replacing and updating the electronic monitors at the perimeter for the last four hours, and other than instructions, she hadn't said more than two words to him.

With only three more points to work, he realized he was running out of time when she'd be forced to be in his presence. He'd already wasted hours he could have been pleading his case. Whatever the hell his case was.

Tyler cleared his throat as he pulled up next to a fencepost that concealed motion sensors and a tiny infrared camera. "Zoe—"

She was out of the truck, the door slamming on her name. Tyler scrambled out after her and circled the bed. He scanned the horizon for threats automatically, even as he tried to figure out some way to convince her being his mate wouldn't be too horrible.

His lion insisted he dominate her. His human side urged him to reason with her. But on one thing the man and lion were in perfect accord. Zoe was his. Which made his priorities clear. Keep her safe, no matter what.

Which would have been easier if she wouldn't insist on throwing herself toward every hint of danger just to prove she could.

"Zoe," he began again, trying to make his voice sound reasonable rather than frustrated. "Would it really be so terrible to be my mate? You know you can always depend on me to watch your back."

"What about your back?" she asked without looking up from the tiny device she was fiddling with on the post. Her tone was hard and ruthless. "Do I get to watch it?"

Tyler hesitated, knowing his instinctive response of *hell no* wasn't going to get him the reaction he wanted. "If it were necessary to have someone watch my back..."

Zoe's head snapped up and her eyes narrowed at the evasion. "Bullshit. If I tried to do anything to defend you, you'd probably tie me to your bed for a week."

Tyler couldn't deny the idea held some appeal.

"If I were to mate with some lion—if, mind you—it would have to go both ways. Equals."

"It does go both ways." He protected her body, and she protected his heart. If anything happened to her...

"God, Tyler, you are such a crappy liar."

He flinched, feeling his future with Zoe slipping away at the distance in her voice. "You have to understand—"

"Oh I get it. The idea of me being hurt makes you feel sick and you're convinced the only thing that will keep me safe is you standing there ready to take any bullet aimed at me."

His breath left him. "Yes. That's it."

"Did you ever stop to think that I feel exactly the same way? That your complete lack of trust in my ability to watch *your* back is as frustrating as it is insulting? How would you feel if I left you chained to the stove while I went waltzing off into God-knows-what? I'm not asking you to stop protecting me, Tyler. I know that would go against every alpha instinct you have. I'm just asking you to let me protect *you*. We have to be equals in this or I'm going to end up trying to kill you someday—and it'll be self-defense because you couldn't stop smothering me. I'm not like Ava. If you want to date some delicate flower, you need to look elsewhere."

He didn't want to look elsewhere. He wanted Zoe *because* of her strength, the fight that was a part of her down to her soul, but he'd been denying her that part. He'd admired her fierceness, her power as a lioness, but then he'd tried to bind her spirit.

And he didn't know how not to. If her definition of compromise put her in danger, he didn't think he could do it.

She must have read the truth on his face. Her hands fisted, her expression locking down to a flat, emotionless mask that looked so wrong on her expressive face.

"It isn't going to work," she said softly. "We have to end this now, before things get any more complicated."

"No." The word sprang out of him with the same force as his claws that suddenly unsheathed. He never shifted involuntarily, never lost control, but the thought of Zoe just giving up and walking away pierced right through his shields and stabbed his heart.

"You don't get to dictate to me," she retorted. Her eyes were bright with anger, the vivid expression back in her face, but her hands were deft and gentle as she handled the sensors, never pausing in her work. "I never agreed to take you as my mate and even if I had, it wouldn't be a free pass for you to run my life." She snapped the cover closed on the post sensors and swept her tools up. She stalked toward him, challenge

in every line of her body. “I’m never going to be the meek little woman who sits obediently by with her fucking *needlepoint* while you ride off into battle.” She flung her tools through the open truck window onto the bench seat, but didn’t move to climb in, turning to snarl up at him, “And I am *never* going to take orders from you.”

Tyler started toward her, intending to give the words *kiss her into submission* new definition, when something sharp jabbed into his shoulder. He hesitated, raising a hand to the sting, blinking as the world slowed and the colors of the pasture bled into one another before his eyes like an impressionist painting. *What the hell?*

“Tyler?” Zoe’s voice sounded like it was coming from an out-of-tune radio, soft, then suddenly loud then soft again, and all battling against the static that filled his ears.

“Run,” he grunted, as his knees gave way. Whatever drug they’d shot him with, it was fast working.

His cheek smacked into the ground hard. He couldn’t lift his arms to brace for the impact. His vision was still functioning—blurred though it was—as all the rest of his motor functions shut down one by one. He saw Zoe’s boots running away from him—obeying him for once in her life, thank God—but the steps were slowing, staggering, and she didn’t make it ten yards before she slumped to the ground.

No.

A surge of something vicious and powerful ran through his blood. His vision cleared. He still had no feeling in his arms, but he managed to move them even though they felt like they belonged to someone else. Rolling slightly to the side, he shoved himself up. Half-crawling, half-dragging himself, he inched toward Zoe.

Protect your mate.

Another sting pierced his neck. Tyler lifted his dead-weight hand and yanked the dart out before the tranquilizer could find its way into his bloodstream. But enough of the damn poison had gotten in to send him crashing back to the ground.

Zoe, Zoe, Zoe. His eyes stayed locked on her unmoving form in front of him as he willed his body to fight the drug. She’d become his mantra, his reason for being. They could take him, but he had to get her out of here.

His eyes were still open, his hearing still staticky but functioning, when a pair of footsteps approached.

“Jesus, he’s still conscious.”

“Hit him again.”

“Will that damage him? I already gave him enough to take down an elephant. He said a breeding pair is no good if one is damaged.”

“Do you want this big fucker waking up before we get him back to the lab? Hit him a-fucking-gain.”

“Fine, but you get to explain it to the boss if he’s sterile or brain-dead.”

The second man snorted. “Just don’t aim for his junk. Brain-dead isn’t a problem.”

Tyler didn’t feel where the next dart hit him. He only knew it had when a yellow fog swamped him and the world faded away.

Chapter Ten

The voices were the first thing that infringed on Zoe's consciousness. Long before she was awake enough to move, she heard them, broken riddles that faded in and out and meant nothing in her fuzzy cotton-candy world.

"...can't keep him under. Nothing in the data suggests a male of his size should be able to..."

"...responding to the hormone yet? Check her temperature again."

"...don't think the wall will hold if he attacks it again..."

"...shouldn't she be shifting? The data clearly states within four hours of injection..."

"...you wanna try putting him in restraints, be my guest. I'm not going in there..."

"...running out of sedative..."

Sedative. That explained the IV she could feel in her arm. She was drugged. Was she in the hospital? Lying on her back, she could be in a hospital bed. Had she been in an accident? Emergency surgery? The voices didn't sound like the pride doctor. If she wasn't at the pride, where was she?

The last thing she remembered...huh. What was the last thing she remembered?

Tyler's face pushed to the front of her fuzziness. *Tyler.* She remembered the shock on his face as he told her to run, the sickening dread and fear that had hardened in her stomach as he'd collapsed at her feet, the sting in her upper arm. She remembered running for help, though everything in her screamed to stay and guard him. Then nothing.

Chills shot through her blood, but Zoe couldn't let terror freeze her. They'd been taken. Were they being held together? Was he all right? Was she?

She flexed her muscles as much as she could without moving, careful not to alert their captors that she was awake. She tested her extremities. Everything seemed to be working, but she felt...odd. Achy, hot, and like her skin had been stretched too tight.

"I can tell you're awake." The voice was feminine and high-pitched, young. Not one of *the* voices.

Zoe opened her eyes. The room was tiny and poorly lit, the walls and ceiling corrugated metal, like a container from a cargo ship. But they were in west Texas, or at least they had been when they were captured, not exactly close to a port. The room barely fit the narrow twin bed Zoe was strapped to and a pile of unidentifiable medical equipment.

The girl who'd spoken stood in the corner, as far as she could get from Zoe without leaving the room. She was older than Zoe'd guessed from her voice, but still couldn't be much more than twenty-five. Thin

and nervous, she clutched a water bottle against her breastbone, her wide eyes fixed on Zoe as if she might leap from the bed and eat her—which she would, if she weren't strapped to the bed tight enough to restrict circulation.

"Where am I?" Zoe tried to say, but her voice came out a ragged croak. Her throat was raw, as if she hadn't swallowed for days. How long had she been out? She felt nauseous. From lack of food? Or the aftereffects of the drug? She hadn't completely shaken it off. The room still seemed to lurch and sway around her.

"Are you thirsty?" the girl asked, though she showed no inclination to give Zoe the water.

Zoe ignored the question as beyond idiotic. "What do you want?"

She fidgeted with the bottle. "I'm not supposed to be talking to you. They only let me check your vitals."

A low growl and a shuffling thud sounded through the wall. Zoe's heart rate quickened. *Tyler*.

The girl made a keening noise and scuttled away from the metal barrier. "You need to get him to calm down," she whispered urgently. "They want him alive because they've never been able to capture a breedable pair before, but if they can't keep him sedated, they'll kill him. You have to make him stop."

"Untie me and I will."

She shook her head frantically. "I can't."

One of the voices filtered through the wall. "...half dose should do her. Use the rest on him."

The girl shuddered. She was terrified. Of Tyler, of Zoe, but also of *them*.

"I'm not even supposed to be talking to you. You need to use your mate-link thingy to tell him you're okay, or they're going to shoot him with something other than a tranq."

Mate-link thing? "We don't have—"

"Candice!" A piece of the wall slid open and a slim, dark-haired man with a ponytail appeared in the opening, holding a syringe. "Out. Now."

The girl sucked in a sharp breath and darted past the ponytail guy.

He advanced toward Zoe, never looking at her face, his eyes flicking over her body like she was nothing more than an animal or a specimen on a table. Which to him, she probably was. Zoe jerked against her restraints, baring sharp teeth and releasing her claws in a partial shift, but it didn't do any good.

The plunger on the syringe pressed down. The world blacked out.

The last thing Zoe heard was the unmistakable roar of an enraged lion. Numb lips twitched in a smile of vicious satisfaction. They'd messed with the wrong lion.

Tyler was coming for her.

Tyler swam up through a yellow haze, desperately clawing his way to consciousness even though he couldn't remember why he felt such violent urgency. He knew only that he needed to be awake. To be strong.

He heard a snarling roar and realized dimly that it was coming from him. His fur felt sticky—blood?—and his claws were extended with the awareness of a threat. He scented the air, trying to identify the danger.

Metal, chemicals, human sweat, a fading scent of onions. And beneath it all, familiar as his own heartbeat, *Zoe*.

Protect your mate.

There it was. That's why he needed to be sharp. Why he needed to fight. He had to keep her safe. His mate, his life.

And they'd dared touch her.

Tyler launched himself at a wall already heavily gouged, the metal yielding like warm butter beneath his claws. He heard voices shouting on the other side, frantic and panicked. *Good. Let them piss themselves with fear.* Tyler roared again, pushed beyond reason and violence into blind carnage.

The room jerked. Only when it slammed to a stop, throwing him sideways against the far wall, did he realize the entire structure had been moving. As his lion leapt again at the sides of his cage, savagery in every swipe of his paws, the small part of him, buried deep but still capable of rational thought, picked up on the telling details.

The room was claustrophobically tight, no room for a running start. They had to be in a trailer of some kind. If the bastards had been dragging a camper all over, it would explain why the pride hadn't been able to track their movements to any one spot. It also meant he had no idea where they were and only instinct telling him he hadn't already been separated from Zoe. Instinct and scent. She was either near or they'd doused the trailer in the scent of her distress just to send him into a frenzy.

Dimly he heard panicked voices seeping through the holes his claws were punching in the metal.

"...used the last of the sedative an hour ago. He's shaking it off at four times the rate the research suggests," a tenor whined.

"I don't give a shit. Get a hold of the situation!" a dark, authoritative voice barked. "I can't drive with a thousand pounds of enraged lion rattling around back here. Put him under or fucking put him down, but get control, dammit! We can always catch another male, but I refuse to jeopardize the female. We've never been able to experiment on one before—"

Tyler stopped listening. The female. *Zoe*. Like hell they were going to experiment on his mate. His humanity receded under the crushing need to reach Zoe. To protect her, no matter the cost. Adrenaline coursed through his blood, thickening it until each heartbeat was heavy with angry purpose.

He coiled back on his haunches and sprang at the door. Jagged metal edges screamed against one another, more piercing than nails on a chalkboard, as the frame gave way. The deadbolts held, but the frame ripped out of its moorings. The heavy metal panel fell into the room beyond, a feral lion riding it down.

Tyler spun in a circle, his tail lashing out behind him as he scanned for threats. He'd fallen into a compact office of some kind, tightly packed with filing drawers and locked cabinets. It was empty, but held two additional doors. The one next to where he'd been held smelled sterile, with distinct human scents—*lab*. That's where the men behind the voices were hiding. But the door on the opposite side of the little office smelled so familiar the fur on his shoulders stood on end. *Zoe*.

Anger called him toward the lab, but need drove him across the room. The deadbolts holding Zoe's cell shut required thumbs, but for a moment he couldn't shift. Rage locked him in his lion form. Tyler planted his paws on the metal floor, struggling to calm himself enough to change. There wasn't time to waste. The scientists must have heard the crash. They would know he was loose. They'd be coming.

But his body refused to obey. Tyler, who never lost control, was at the mercy of his lion and the lion wouldn't rest until he'd ripped out some throats and lapped up the warm blood that spurted out.

The small part of him that still possessed some shred of human awareness appreciated the catch-22. His feral need to protect his mate prevented him from freeing her, but the man's frustration was a dim echo of the lion's obsession.

The sound of the lab door opening behind him spun him snarling to face the new threat. Time was up. The lion roared his pleasure. He would have blood.

Zoe came awake to the same sound that had followed her into darkness—a familiar ragged roar. But much closer now. Tyler was right outside the door. He'd gotten loose.

He's coming for me.

The sharp comfort that thought inspired was disconcerting. Was she a damsel in distress? Did she just lie there and wait to be rescued? Tyler would always come for her, her certainty of that fact was unshakeable, but she refused to be declawed by that certainty. She was a lioness, dammit. She didn't wait for a white knight.

Even if she was still doopey from sedative and strapped to a bed. She wasn't without resources.

Zoe tested the restraints, but they were no looser than before. She was going to have to shift. It would destroy her clothes and hurt like hell—changing the shape of her body while restrained felt like her joints had been repeatedly jerked out of their sockets and rammed back in again. But she wasn't afraid of pain.

Zoe reached for her lioness form. There was a minute delay, thanks to the sedative still slowing her reflexes, but when it came, the change ripped through her hard. The force of the shift shredded the leather of the restraints, and she gave a feline hiss of pain. Shaking off the remnants of leather, she sprang to the

foot of the bed on four paws then abruptly shifted back again, coming to her human form with her arms wrapped around her middle like she could hold the broken pieces of herself together.

“Shit.” *Yeah, it definitely hurt.* Lurching to her feet, she staggered from the wave of dizziness that always accompanied changing form twice in quick succession. She groped at the door, fumbling with the knob for several seconds before her fuzzy thoughts cleared enough for her to realize it was locked. *Brilliant, Zoe.*

She was doing a pretty shitty job of rescuing herself so far.

She didn’t know how long it had been since she’d eaten, but it was too long to risk another shift—she’d just pass out in lioness form. Helplessness churned sickeningly in her gut. Then a pair of gunshots echoed loudly in the room beyond her cage.

“Tyler!” she screamed. Claws sprang from her fingertips, her teeth sharpening to fangs as she barely stopped a full shift from incapacitating her.

A fraction of a second later the door sprang open, and Zoe saw the blood.

It wasn’t the pain of the bullet punching through his shoulder that brought Tyler back to humanity. It was the sound of Zoe’s voice screaming through the door.

The pansy-ass science geek who had fired wildly into the room retreated behind the shut door to the lab again. Taking advantage of the cowardice and his own sudden clarity, Tyler shifted back to human form. Blood gushed from the hole in his shoulder, running faster with the reconfiguring of his body. It streamed down his torso in thick rivulets, but he didn’t care. He threw back the bolts on Zoe’s cage and yanked the door open, his heart jerking spasmodically at the sight of her, clothing shredded, claws sharp, fangs bared. She was an Amazon warrior ready for battle.

Sweet Jesus, she was gorgeous.

He reached for her, needing to touch her, but though she rushed forward, it wasn’t into his arms. “God damn, you’re bleeding a ton. No spurting, that’s good. Not arterial, then.” Her hands slapped his shoulder over the bullet hole, bearing down on the wound. Tyler made a sound that wasn’t remotely human, and Zoe’s wild eyes jerked up to meet his. “Who shot you? How many are left?” Her words were choppy, efficient and emotionless—crisis mode.

As gratified as he was by her confidence that he’d already eliminated some, he couldn’t live up to her expectation. He shook his head as he pulled her behind a filing cabinet so they’d have some cover if the bastards opened fire again. “I’ve heard two men and one girl.”

Zoe nodded once. “The girl’s scared shitless. She shouldn’t be a problem. The one guy I saw was sort of thinnish, but if they’re armed—” She broke off, her eyes scanning every surface of the tiny office even as she applied pressure to the wound in his shoulder. “D’you see anything I can use as a shield? Kevlar would be nice, but I doubt they left a flak jacket lying around for me.”

Tyler wrapped his fingers around Zoe's wrist to get her attention, focused on the one part of her statement that scared him most. "You aren't going in there."

"You want to wait 'em out? I gotta say that's a pretty crappy plan, Tyler, since I'm pretty sure the exit to this tin can is through that room. Unless you're feeling up to tearing through another wall."

"I'll go."

"You're bleeding. A lot. There's macho and then there's dumbass. Don't be a dumbass."

The animal rose up inside him, fast and violent, and he ground his teeth against the primal urge to shift. He'd probably die of blood loss if he did, but instinct didn't care. "I can't watch you get shot, Zoe," he growled. The sight would kill him faster than a bullet.

"Yeah, well, I can't stand here and watch you get shot *again*. The one who isn't injured gets to take on the bad guys. Those are the rules."

"Together." The word was painful to push out, but Zoe was right, he wasn't much protection shot up and unable to shift to his more powerful form.

"Together? Bonnie and Clyde style?"

Tyler winced. "Maybe pick a couple who didn't die."

"Can't think of any. Butch and Sundance... Thelma and Louise..."

"Zoe. Stop."

"Together is good," she said, a catch in her voice.

He squeezed her wrist gently, looking away from the door to study the curves of her face he'd long since memorized. Dark circles smudged the smooth skin beneath her eyes, lines of stress bracketed her mouth and her eyes were glassy, but her hands were steady. "Zoe," he whispered.

She swallowed thickly, looking up to meet his eyes. "Yeah, I know. I love you too."

His heart lurched. He'd run from her, from this, for months. He'd known from the second he laid eyes on her that Zoe King was *his*, and he'd done everything he could to keep from falling for her. He'd seen her as another duty, another weight of responsibility, but Zoe wasn't an obligation, she was his whole heart. He didn't just need her or want her, he loved her with an intensity that made the rest of his life small by comparison.

What kind of fool saw that truth only when their life together might last only a few more minutes?

Tyler wrapped his uninjured arm around Zoe and held her against his chest, pressing a kiss on her forehead, breathing in the scent of her—even if it was overlaid with the thick tang of his own blood.

A muted thud from behind the door to the lab called them back to the task at hand.

Zoe pulled away, straightening to stand on her own. "Let's do this."

Zoe crouched on her haunches beside the door, trying to shake the woozy feeling that had accompanied her latest shift. Tyler hunched to the left of the doorway, ready to throw it open so Zoe could

leap through—a plan she'd feel much more confident with if he didn't look like he was about to pass out from blood loss.

They made a great team. Dizzy and dizzier. If surviving came down to a race to see who could lose consciousness first, they were set.

But the situation wasn't going to get better if they waited. There was nothing in the office to stitch Tyler up and nothing for her to eat to get her energy level up. They were never going to be in better shape than they were in right now.

Zoe nodded once—the gesture always feeling oddly foreign in her feline form—and Tyler reached for the doorknob.

She darted through the opening as soon as it was wide enough to fit her body, belly low to the ground, teeth bared, claws out—and drew up short, paws scrabbling to stop her momentum on the smooth tiles of the lab.

Two bodies lay prone on the floor, unmoving, white foam dribbling from their mouths and a sickly sweet smell rising off them. Zoe hissed, instinctively backing away from the too-sweet death scent.

Ponytail guy and a younger, even thinner man with a military-style haircut weren't going to be a problem anymore.

"What the hell?" Tyler stood in the doorway, frowning at the bodies on the floor.

A clicking sound brought Zoe around sharply, and she saw the girl, huddled in the corner between an exam table and a metal cabinet, sobbing silently and shaking so hard her teeth were rattling against one another. "I c-c-couldn't," she moaned, holding something clutched tightly in her fist. "Please don't h-h-hurt me."

Zoe closed her mouth to hide the sharpness of her fangs, rising out of her hunting crouch.

"A suicide pill?" Tyler bent over the bodies to check for pulses, his nose wrinkling at the sweet-and-sour scent. He turned his head toward the girl. "Why?"

"B-B-Ben said the bullets didn't stop you. We didn't have s-s-silver," she explained, somewhat calmer now that she wasn't being snarled at by a few hundred pounds of pissed-off lioness.

Silver bullets. Thank God for superstitious idiots.

"Ben was a lousy shot," Tyler grunted. "Why not just run?"

"They knew too much to be captured and tortured by weres."

Tyler's eyebrows arched speculatively. Zoe could almost see him assuming the mantle of a pride lieutenant. "And what do *you* know?"

The girl's teeth began to chatter again. "I don't know anything! I'm new. They only brought me in a couple months ago in San Antonio. Long after they broke off from the Organization. I don't know where any of the research bases are, I swear. Just don't hurt me!"

The Organization. Zoe's ears pricked forward. The girl didn't know how much she did know. The shifters had never even had a name for their boogeyman before now.

"We aren't going to hurt you. What's your name?"

"C-C-Candice. Candice Murphy."

"Candice. Where are we?" Tyler asked her.

Her face screwed up in concentration. "New Mexico? We couldn't make very good time because Dr. B couldn't use the main roads with you making the truck swerve all over, throwing yourself around back there."

Zoe eyed the two men on the floor, wondering which of them was Dr. B. Her stomach rumbled noisily, hunger from her multiple shifts stabbing into her gut. If she didn't eat soon, she'd be tempted to take a bite out of one of the bodies. Just a small bite. A little nibble from the calf maybe. Did it even count as cannibalism if she was in her lion form?

The room dipped and swayed around her and Zoe sneezed, shaking her head sharply to try to get the world back to rights.

"Zo? You all right, babe?" Tyler came toward her, digging his fingers into the fur behind her ears. She leaned into his touch, steadied by his presence.

When the wall behind him began to slide to the side, she thought it was just her eyes playing tricks on her again. Until the muzzle of a gun lowered into the opening, aimed at Tyler's broad back.

Dr. B wasn't on the floor.

Zoe roared, throwing her weight against Tyler's legs to knock him to the ground and leaping past him toward the opening as the gun fired, deafeningly loud in the enclosed space. Zoe didn't have time to see if the bullet had struck Tyler. She landed hard on the heavy-set man behind the sliding panel which led to the cab of a truck. Her claws ripped through flesh, her teeth sinking deep into the soft tissue of his throat, cutting off any attempt at a scream. Warm blood gushed in a sweet rush into her mouth.

This man had tried to kill Tyler. He'd kidnapped her and experimented on her. Who knew how many other shifters he'd harmed? She basked in the last feeble beats of his heart before dropping his body with a thud. She swayed over him, dizzy from expending the last of her energy, and felt Tyler's hands on her, steadying her.

She looked up, seeing only that he was whole—no new bullet wounds marking him. Then the world flipped upside down and whooshed away from her like a train through a dark tunnel, and Zoe collapsed into blackness.

Chapter Eleven

“Ben and Andy worked for the Organization for like six months, but they weren’t being given any responsibility, see? So they decided to go it alone. They’d heard about Dr. Busey getting kicked out of the Organization for trying to, you know, breed the weres in captivity, which went against the Organization’s, erm, mission statement, I guess? So they went to find Dr. Busey and get some hands-on experience. When I met them, they’d all been together for a couple months, hunting weres. Dr. B was definitely the boss, but he let Ben and Andy have, like, responsibility, right? They were more like equals. I mean, Ben barely even got in trouble with Dr. B for telling me about the weres. I almost knew already. I’d read a lot of werewolf books, right? And I told him I really wanted to see one up close, see? So Ben convinced Dr. B to let me come along as a research assistant. That was when we heard about this town.”

“So the Organization doesn’t know about this pride?” Landon’s sharp question cut across Candice’s rambling recital.

She sat on a chair in the mess hall, her hands wrapped around a cup of cocoa, surrounded by the pride’s war council. They hadn’t needed to torture anything out of her, though Zoe thought they might need to apply thumbscrews to get the girl to shut up about how cool it was to be around “weres”.

“I don’t think so. I mean, Dr. B was always saying how the Organization had their heads up their you-know-whats cuz they were ignoring all the signs of were activity south of the Rockies. He says they were dumb to fixate on the wolves. Said,” Candice corrected after a moment, her eyes flicking sideways to Zoe before scuttling back to gaze worshipfully at Landon.

So the pride was safe. For now. As safe as they’d ever been. And more informed than they’d ever been.

Zoe shoved away from the wall she’d been propping up and slipped out the side door, restlessness driving her feet. She was halfway up the path to the infirmary before she realized where she’d been headed. Tyler was up there, getting patched up by the pride doc. He’d insisted Zoe be looked at first, idiot man, and after a nutrient shot and eating her weight in red meat, she was fine and dandy. While he still had a hole in him.

Zoe rubbed a hand against the pressure in her chest, turning and walking down the path away from the infirmary.

The jumbo-sized camping backpack that had traveled with her across the country was dusty when she pulled it out of her closet. Zoe brushed off the thick fabric and unzipped it, flopping it open on her bed.

Packing wouldn't take long. She didn't have much she wanted to keep. Travel light. That was her motto. Easier to run that way.

When a soft tap came at her door, Zoe flinched, her hands freezing in the act of stuffing her rain poncho into a side pouch. She half-expected Tyler, though it was early yet for him to be released from medical. Her other instinct was Landon, but he must still be interrogating the prisoner.

She didn't want to see anyone else. She didn't particularly want to see those two either. She just wanted to go. And she didn't want to think about or talk about why.

The knock came again, accompanied by "Zoe?" in Ava's distinctive husky rasp.

"Shit," Zoe muttered. Ava would look at her with those big, eerily ice-grey eyes, all wounded and shit that Zoe hadn't planned on saying goodbye. Guilt rose up like bile and Zoe swallowed it down. One thing she wasn't was a coward. "Come in."

Ava opened the door just enough to slip her slight frame inside and shut it behind her, leaning back against the wood. "Hey."

"Hey." Zoe didn't stop packing—a silent reminder to them both that she wouldn't be talked out of going.

"I didn't expect to find you packing," Ava said softly. "Not after the way you came back."

Zoe didn't need the reminder of their dramatic return. She'd been dipping in and out of consciousness, but even she knew what it must have looked like. Tyler driving through the gates in the truck with the researchers' trailer hitched to the back, kicking open the door and carrying Zoe to the infirmary, even though his shoulder was bleeding through the makeshift bandage Candice had rigged for him. The message had been clear to everyone who saw it—Tyler had saved her, saved them all. But instead of sending her swooning into his oh-so-heroic arms, Zoe couldn't face him. She had to get out of here.

"Pride's safe now," she said shortly. "You have Candice and all the files those nutjobs collected on us. Landon doesn't need me anymore."

"Landon was pretty upset when the two of you vanished like that. We all were."

"Tyler's popular."

"*You* are popular, Zoe. Sticking around for a few days to reassure your brother wouldn't kill you. But I don't think Landon is the only one who's going to protest your departure," Ava commented. "Zoe, I haven't interfered in the past—"

"Then don't start now."

Ava ignored her. "I always figured whatever was between you and my brother was your business, but—"

"This isn't about Tyler," Zoe interrupted sharply. The words were only half a lie. It wasn't entirely about Tyler. A lot of it was about her. Who she was when she was with him.

"At least talk to him before you go," Ava urged. "He deserves that courtesy, don't you think?"

“Tyler doesn’t want a mate any more than I do,” Zoe said harshly. “He’ll understand.”

Ava grimaced. “Maybe you’re right. He probably will. God, if two more commitment-phobic people ever existed on this earth...” She sighed, turning to go, but stopped to deliver one last blow to Zoe’s willpower. “If you guys weren’t so busy trying to prove how independent you are, you might just find that you’re perfect for each other. If you would just let yourself be.”

Zoe waited until the door clicked shut behind Ava to slump down onto the bed. Ava was right. Tyler was perfect, but more than that. He was perfect for her.

But perfect didn’t change anything. Zoe grabbed her toiletry bag, zipping it up and shoving it into her pack.

Tyler trotted down the steps of the infirmary, ignoring the doc’s order that he take it easy. One thought drove all others right out of his brain. He needed to find Zoe. Now. He hadn’t seen her since the doc had taken her out of his arms, and his heart wouldn’t slide down from the place it had lodged in his throat until he could see with his own eyes that the reports that she was *good as new* were true.

He needed to touch her, to feel the texture of her skin beneath his fingertips so he could breathe again.

The path to Zoe’s bungalow felt a million miles long, like it had been stretched since the last time he walked it. He moved faster, half-jogging and then running. His shoulder ached like the devil, little jabs of hot pain spearing into him with each jolting footfall, but he didn’t slow. Mara was coming up the path, but stepped out of the way as she saw him coming, a knowing smile quirking her lips.

He didn’t care who saw him. Didn’t care who gave him that smug *must be newly mated* look. He just ran.

The door was open when he got to her bungalow. The room was usually so bare it took him a moment to realize it had been stripped even further. The only item that was Zoe’s left inside was the cowboy hat someone must have collected from the perimeter where they’d been taken. It sat lonely and abandoned on the bed.

She was gone.

Tyler didn’t waste time searching her place. He scented the air and took off after her. He’d be able to track her more easily in lion form, where his sense of smell was sharper, but he wasn’t quite panicked enough to rip his stitches by shifting form. Yet.

Rounding the corner of his garage, he saw her. She stood at the door where he’d pinned her only days ago, a piece of paper in hand, her backpack resting against her ankle. His heart eased its panicked seizing at the sight of her. But his voice was gruff with the aftereffects of fear and anger when he spoke.

“A note?” he growled. “You weren’t even going to wait until I was released from the infirmary?”

Zoe spun toward him, her eyes widening in a way he would have thought was pleasure to see him and something like relief—if not for the fact that she was clearly leaving him. “Tyler.”

“Going somewhere?”

Her expression hardened, firming with resolve. “Yes. I have to go.”

“You don’t have to. No one wants you to leave, Zoe.”

“I want to.” She made a face, turning away from him then turning back before he could take a step toward her. “I don’t like who this is making me,” she said, waving between them to indicate the *this*. “If I leave, at least I’ll be me again.”

Tyler felt his expression softening, even as his chest ached with remorse. This was his fault. He’d failed her. “I’m sorry about what happened in the trailer,” he said, fighting to keep his voice low and steady. “I shouldn’t have let you be put in that position. You shouldn’t have to feel guilty for killing that man.”

Zoe’s snort cut him off. “God, Tyler, that isn’t it. You think I feel bad for killing that bastard? He was trying to shoot us. Put us down like animals. I’d kill him again in a heartbeat—and I’m sorry if I’m a little too bloodthirsty for you, but I figured you of all people would understand why I had to do it.”

“Of course, I—Zoe—if not that, why are you...?”

Her shoulders sagged. “I was the damsel in distress,” she muttered toward her feet. “I expected you to save me. Yeah, I got over it and kicked some ass, but there was this moment when I just *waited* for you. I can’t be that person, Tyler. I don’t like that part of me. The part that wanted to just sit back and let you rescue me. It feels too much like I’m losing who I am, if I become that girl.” She looked up, meeting his eyes for the first time during her speech. “I can’t be with you.”

“It isn’t weakness to rely on someone else, Zoe,” he said, approaching her, needing to touch her, feeling that if he could just get his hands on her, she wouldn’t be able to slip out of his life like smoke on the wind. “I’ve spent my entire life protecting everyone around me, doing it all myself, being the rock. You were the first person I depended on. I wouldn’t have let you watch my back if you were weak.” Close enough to touch her now, he gently brushed a hand across her jaw, cupping it. “I wouldn’t love you if you weren’t a warrior.”

She started to speak, but he could see on her face it was going to be denial, so he spoke over her, willing her to believe him. “I thought we made a pretty good team. You kept me from getting myself shot a second time. Turns out having someone to watch your back isn’t such a bad thing. So who’s gonna do that if you leave me?”

“I know you, Tyler. I don’t want to be another obligation, another person for you to protect.”

“You won’t be,” he vowed. “It isn’t easy for me to let you put yourself at risk, but I don’t ever want to hurt you or hold you back. I’m going to fuck up sometimes. I’m going to try to protect you, no matter what, but I’ll try to listen when you tell me I’m being a complete dipshit. And those obligations...” Tyler shook his head, trying to find the right words, unused to pouring his heart out. He swallowed thickly and tried again, not caring if the words were pretty as long as they were true. “My siblings are my life.”

“And you deserve a life of your own—”

“No, let me finish. My life wouldn’t be anything without my obligations. Without Ava and Michael and Caleb and Kane. They make it... They give my days reason and happiness. And you...my life would be empty without you, Zoe. I need you. I love you. Could you please say something and stop looking at me like that?”

Her lips quirked in a small smile, but he couldn’t celebrate yet. The smile was too sad. “I don’t want to stay here and raise a bunch of cubs.”

“I don’t want that either. Maybe kids. Someday down the road. But I want to leave Three Rocks too. Just you and me.”

She was already shaking her head. “You know you won’t abandon your siblings, Tyler. It isn’t in you to walk away from your responsibilities.”

“They’re grown now. And I won’t be abandoning anyone. Landon will need an ambassador to go to the other prides and packs, warn them about the Organization, make a plan for the future. Hell, maybe even talk about coming out to the humans.” He grinned. “I seem to remember someone thought that was a good idea.”

Zoe’s expressive face had stilled, a thoughtful light kindling in her eyes. “Ambassador?”

Tyler brushed his thumb over the fullness of her lower lip, marking his place. “We need to band together, all the shifters, if we’re going to have any chance of survival, but not all the prides are going to come easily. A trusted, persuasive emissary to travel around the world, acting on behalf of our families and our people... It would have to be a pair. So there’s always someone there to watch out for you...”

Tyler bent and pressed a soft kiss onto Zoe’s lips.

“It’s okay to rely on me, Zoe. I will always be here for you.” He kissed her again, longer this time, lingering in the warmth of her mouth. “It’s okay to need me,” he whispered against her lips. “I need you right back.” He kissed her a third time, deep and drugging, putting everything he felt, everything he hoped for into each caress. “It’s okay to love me...”

“I do.”

He dared put his arms around her. “Just don’t leave me.”

“I can’t. I won’t,” she promised, tugging him down for another kiss, fiercer and more passionate than the last. That single vow lit a fuse in his soul, sending him up like a firecracker exploding in the sky. When she finally pulled back, they were both breathless, clinging to one another to stay upright. They stood in front of the garage, in full view of anyone who cared to walk by, but Tyler couldn’t care less.

Zoe was his. Finally, irrevocably, perfectly *his*.

About damn time.

About the Author

Vivi Andrews lives in Alaska when she isn't indulging her travel addiction. She's currently hard at work on her next paranormal romance. For more about her books or the exploits of a nomadic author, please visit her website at www.viviandrews.com or stop by her blog at viviandrews.blogspot.com. Vivi also loves to hear from readers and invites you to email her at vivi@viviandrews.com.

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What happens in Atlantic City...changes everything.

The Naked Detective

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Karmic Consultants, Book 4

The “gift” that makes Ciara Liung the FBI’s prized secret weapon makes her existence more like a curse. Unable to bear human contact, she lives as a hermit, immersing herself in the water that gives her peace and amplifies her power.

Her new FBI handler, though, only believes what he can see. The problem? Her gift—the ability to psychically locate stolen jewels—only works in the nude.

Special Agent Nathan Smith can’t believe he’s expected to babysit some psychic finder. Psychic...right. An undercover op gone wrong may have left him a desk jockey—and Ciara’s charms are more distracting than he cares to admit—but he’s a field agent at heart. She’s working some kind of angle. It’s just a matter of time before he unravels it.

Sent to Atlantic City to recover a ruby necklace for Monaco’s royal family, both finder and Fed are pushed outside their comfort zones, and discover more than they ever believed possible. And when a trap is sprung, they realize they stand to lose much more than a sparkly stone...

Warning: This book contains gambling, go-go dancers, public indecency, and every brand of trouble a troubled psychic can get into in America’s Playground.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Naked Detective:

Ciara was standing in the stall, pulling her dress over her head, when she realized Nate had actually let her out of his sight. He hadn’t swept the bathroom to make sure there weren’t other exits or frisked her for a hidden cell phone. He’d just let her walk in here without so much as a second glance.

In the four days she’d known him, that was unprecedented.

Could Nate Smith actually believe her?

Ciara came out of the bathroom to find Nate leaning against a slot machine as he waited. He looked utterly relaxed, as if there hadn’t been even a flicker of doubt in his mind that she would return to him. Trust. It seemed to have burst open between them impossibly fast.

She didn’t know when she had started trusting him, a moment ago, a day ago, maybe a part of her had started trusting him the moment he rang her doorbell. But his trust of her seemed to hinge on that moment in the tank. Sure, she’d done it so he would believe her, but now she was suspicious of that instant faith.

Nate levered himself away from the slots. “Come on. Let’s get you out of here.” He started to reach for her hand again, then snatched his hand back. His eyes scanned her from her flip-flop bedecked toes all the way up to her still-damp hair, as if checking for war wounds.

Ciara rolled her eyes. “I’m *fine*. Better than fine. I’m—” Again words failed. This feeling, it was too much. “Come on. We’ve got a necklace to find.”

She grabbed his hand and dragged him behind her toward the street exit. Ciara felt like laughing, though she didn’t know why.

She wore his jacket over her dress—the shawl a casualty of her dunking—but as soon as they stepped out of the air-conditioning of the casino, she shrugged it off. The sun hit the skin of her arms and felt delicious. For once she was outside, surrounded by people and not worried about being brushed against.

Though maybe she should be worried. What if it was only Nate she could touch?

He hailed a taxi and ushered her into the backseat, careful as he had been all week not to touch her skin.

“The Borgata, please,” she told the driver.

Nate climbed in after her. “No,” he said, “let’s go back to the hotel. You can rest—”

“The Borgata,” she repeated, more firmly. No more invalid treatment. No more hiding.

There were a million things she’d never done. Too many things. A wild excitement pulsed through her veins. A thousand possibilities.

She could eat in a restaurant, dance in a club, go to a movie in a crowded theater where the schmuck next to her would steal her armrest. She could fly on a plane. Go to Egypt or Bermuda or Taiwan. She didn’t know why she should want to go to Taiwan unless she was picking up a few sweatshop workers, but the fact that she *could* changed everything. It changed *her*.

Nate wedged himself against the car door, as far away from her as he could get without leaping into oncoming traffic.

“What are you doing way over there?”

“Recovering from the heart attack you gave me on the pier,” he snapped. “And trying to figure out how to talk you into going back to the hotel and leaving the jewel thieves to the professionals.”

“I thought I was a suspect,” she purred, scooting across the bench seat toward him. “Don’t you want my confession?”

He leaned away, pressing into the door. “You aren’t a crook. I believe you. Now back off, before you give yourself another seizure.”

Ciara kept her eyes locked on his, slowly shaking her head. “Nate, for the first time in the last decade, I can touch someone without feeling like someone dropped a cherry bomb into my brain. Do you honestly think I’m not going to take advantage of this for every second it lasts?” She reached out and laid her fingers along his jaw. She *listened* and the touch sang through her, a perfect pitch ringing sweetly, deep inside her rib cage.

She slid her fingers down, drawing them along the column of his throat, listening as the note shifted with his every breath. Her eyes fixed on his mouth, the delicious masculine curve of it.

Ten years. She hadn't been kissed in ten years.

"Nate," she whispered. Her upper body leaned forward of its own volition, closing the distance between them. She wet her lips.

"This is a bad idea. I don't think—"

"Don't think. It's overrated." Ciara's eyelids lowered, but she watched him through her lashes, not wanting to miss a single detail of the kiss. She brushed her lips ever so softly over his, a fleeting whisper of a touch. His breath was warm on her lips. His stubble grazed her fingertips, the tantalizing spice of his aftershave teasing her nose. Ciara pressed a closed-mouth kiss full on his mouth and a chord struck in her soul. She placed one hand over his heart, feeling his strength through the thin cloth of his shirt. She wanted bare flesh under her fingers. She wanted to bathe in touch, skin to skin.

Nate kept his mouth closed, his head back. He was frozen against the door, as if afraid to touch her.

Or as if he didn't want her touch.

Ciara drew back. Her eyes flew wide to find him watching her, his gaze steady and concerned.

"You don't—" She hesitated. Crap. With her luck, he was probably gay. Just because he seemed like a big strong macho man and gaped at her naked girly bits whenever the opportunity presented itself didn't mean he wasn't batting for the other team. "You aren't—" She couldn't very well ask him what his sexual orientation was five seconds after she planted one on him.

God, her people skills sucked. That's what happened when you lived in a freaking bubble for a decade and learned all of your social skills from the television and internet. Had she missed some signal?

He watched her. God, the way he watched her. It made her feel like she was edible, sweet and sinful, and he was hungry for some decadent indulgence. Would a gay man look at her like that?

But if he wasn't gay, what the hell was he doing cowering beside the door like she was molesting him against his will. His body was eerily still, but his eyes raced over her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, an odd urgency running under the words.

Was she *okay*? She kissed him. He didn't kiss her back. And now he was concerned that...what?

"That didn't hurt you?" His voice was rough.

Ciara blinked, the pieces suddenly jolting into place. Of course. Mr. All-American was concerned for her well-being. His moral fortitude prevented him from enjoying a kiss if it might be hurting her. Damn moral fortitude. Why couldn't he just take advantage of her like a normal man?

"I'm fine," she assured him in a rush. "Great, actually. It feels amazing."

"Good."

Before she had time to react to that guttural growl, his hands were on her arms. He hauled her forward across his lap. His mouth crashed down on hers, urging her to open for him, and a symphony exploded inside her. Ciara threw her arms around his neck and held on tight. She parted her lips and his tongue slipped between them, a whip of heat unfurling in her stomach with each flick.

She didn't remember kisses like this. She remembered the fumbling, groping, wide-open-mouthed attempts of her adolescence, before her curse hit. This was unlike any of those. This was skill and persuasion, seduction and heat. As a fiery concerto radiated out from her soul, a clenching warmth rose up from her toes, tingling along every nerve. Nate's hands chased those tingles and multiplied them, tracing her curves through the thin barrier of her clothes.

He raised his head. His eyes searched hers as they clung together, both breathing rapidly. "Ciara?"

"More, Nate," she whispered. "Please, touch me more."

He groaned and crushed her to him, instantly obeying. His mouth slanted down on hers and she fell into sensation.

He's no one's hero. She's no one's pawn. And now they're caught in the crossfire...

Deadlock

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Southern Arcana, Book 3

Abandoned by her wolf shifter father and raised by her human psychic mother, Carmen Mendoza can't deny she's different. She craves things most women shy away from—and she has a trail of shapeshifting ex-boyfriends to prove it.

Working at a clinic for supernatural creatures, she's escaped the notice of her father's legacy-obsessed family. Until they need a pawn in their bid for power. Snared by a vicious spell designed to wake her inner wolf, Carmen's only hope is to trust the one man strong enough to soothe her darkest instincts.

Alec Jacobson was once the heir apparent to the wolves' ruling elite, until he walked away to marry the woman he loved. She paid with her life. Now he lives as a rebel, a black-sheep alpha who protects the supernatural residents of New Orleans from the wolves' barbaric class system. Too bad he can't protect himself from his need for Carmen.

Yet staking his claim on his enemy's niece will turn his city into a battleground. Unless he can find a way to stop breaking the rules—and start making them.

Warning: This book contains a renegade alpha wolf, a smart empathic doctor, very dirty sex with psychic safe-words, the occasional dominance game in and out of the bedroom, and a group of supernatural citizens ready to take on the corrupt leaders of their world.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Deadlock:

Carmen slowed and spun, walking backwards. "How long have you lived here?"

"This house?" He slowed too, to a casual amble. "Bought it...oh, nine or ten years back."

"And do you do this often?"

"Run? Or chase women through the woods?"

"That's chivalrous of you, to keep pretending you're the one doing the chasing here."

One eyebrow quirked up. "You're right. If I were really chasing you, you'd be under me already."

"Now there's a thought." She had to get used to the blatant, idle flirtation. She couldn't get aroused every time he said something like that, or she'd be perpetually horny—and frustrated. "I meant your obvious role as protector and mentor. Do you have a lot of new wolves beating down your door?"

"A few," he acknowledged with that infuriating little smile. "Someone has to take care of them, and I'm good at it."

And he needed it. She might never hear the admission from his lips, but she felt it plainly. "Thank you."

“You’re welcome. You’re going to trip and break your neck if you keep walking backwards on this path.”

She stopped. “I was trying not to be rude.”

He jerked his chin toward the path. “Quarter mile, maybe a little more. There’s a nice clearing. I’ll give you a ten-second head start.”

The predatory glint in his eyes stole her breath and kicked her heart rate into high gear. “Head start for what?”

“Before I chase you. For real.”

She had to be crazy to consider it, even if the thought made her body buzz. “And then what? More dirty talk because you can’t sleep with me, but you can sure the hell torture me with your eyes and muscles and ridiculously hot voice?”

He actually laughed. “Can’t do much to fix any of that. I could back off, I guess, but you’re not going to like that much better.”

“No, I suppose I wouldn’t.” She didn’t feel like a crazed animal, but she’d never been quite so moved by feral instinct, either. “Go easy on me, would you?”

Pacing herself wasn’t a problem, not if it was only a quarter of a mile, so Carmen ran hard, pushing herself almost at a sprint. Soon, the near-echo of trampled brush drifted from behind her, and she smiled through her panting.

He let her get three long strides into the clearing before he tackled her, somehow twisting their bodies as they fell so she sprawled across his chest. His low, delighted laughter curled around her, warm as the arms that circled her waist. “Easy as I get.”

Too easy. Too intimate. She wiggled out of his arms and landed on the ground beside him. “You smile like you’re not used to it, did you know that?”

Laughter died, and he twisted his head to stare at her. “It’s been a while. Only other person willing to poke at me until I laugh is Kat. I always figured she did it because she knows I’m not going to kill her, even if I’m glaring like I want to. An empathy thing.”

“Maybe.” She wanted to reassure him with her touch, but she thrummed with a sexual awareness he could surely sense. “Is everyone else so careful with you because they’re scared?”

“Some of them are.” He slid his fingers over hers, his hand a heavy weight. “What do you feel? Beneath the sex, what does my power feel like?”

Dominant. Implacable. “You’re strong, and you’re intense.” All things so wound up in her attraction to him that there could be no separation.

“And I’m a little crazy. Or I act that way enough that everyone thinks it’s true. Better if most of the scary people in town are wary of pissing me off.”

"Makes sense." His hand was huge, warm and a bit rough. She wanted to feel it on her body, sliding down her back and curling around her hip to hold her still for a hard, demanding thrust.

The mental image formed so quickly that all she could do was bite her lip as she blinked and willed it away.

His fingers tightened around hers. "I hate not knowing what to do. If I'll hurt you more leaving you alone, or by giving you what you crave. I don't want to hurt you at all. Do you have any fucking idea how long it's been since I didn't know what to do?"

"You're too hard on yourself," she admonished. "It isn't your job to keep me from hurting, and no one knows everything all the time."

"It's my job to keep from hurting you." He lifted his hand and hers with it, sliding it up until they pressed into the grass over her head. Then he released her and rolled to his side, propped up on his elbow so the bulk of his body loomed above her. "It's all a damn excuse. It's my job, and I'd be doing it anyway...but that's not why I'm doing it now."

It was the most nonsensical thing she'd heard in a while. "Are you saying you want to protect me?"

"I'm saying I *want* to protect you." His free hand landed on her stomach, skimming up to skip over her breasts and land on her collarbone. "You're not scared of me. Even when I'm acting crazy."

"Because you're not crazy." She caught his hand and held it still. "Don't do this just because you think I need it. It's not worth it."

His eyes looked so dark they might as well have been black. "Honey, I thought you were an empath."

"You know what I mean. If you still think I'm not in my right mind, the guilt would kill you, and I only want you to feel good about this."

He considered that for a moment, then guided her other hand up above her head. "I'm going to kiss you. Deep. Hard. You okay with that?"

He'd urged her into a position of submission—both hands over her head, her body stretched out beneath his—and it made her shake with anticipation. "More than okay."

"You want me to stop, you say stop." One hand curled around both of her wrists, gentle but unyielding. "You want more, ask for it. Okay?"

Carmen pulled against his grasp, not to free herself but to test his strength. He held tight, her eyes fluttered shut under a wave of need. "Yes."

His free hand settled at her hip in a possessive grip. Power built in the space between them, a slow, steady rise that mirrored the dark heat in his eyes as he lowered his mouth, lips barely touching hers. "Let me in."

The command released something inside her, a tension she hadn't noticed before he eased it, and she closed her eyes again. Honesty was one thing, even a kiss...

Don't think, Carmen. Feel.

She obeyed, loosening her tight hold on control, gasping when the first waves of empathic feedback echoed off him to heat her own body.

His beard scraped her chin as he closed the distance between them with a shuddering groan. He kissed the way she'd seen him live, reckless arrogance and power and an intensity that bordered on intimidating. Lips and teeth and his tongue stroking her mouth until she parted her lips, then surging forward to taste and take, his hunger and satisfaction twisting between them on the threads of her empathy.

She wasn't prepared for the depth of her reaction to his satisfaction. Beyond the undeniable physical pleasure of the kiss was a whole world of intimacy, a power she'd flirted with but never really embraced.

She could give him everything.

More, he'd take it. There could be no doubt of that, not with his desires laid bare before her, the hot need for her pleasure dwarfed by the steely craving to be the only one who provided it. Nothing tentative there. Nothing tentative about the way he teased his tongue against hers, his pleasure spiking every time she moaned and arched closer.

It had to stop, even if depriving herself of his touch drove her mad. Carmen turned her head to break the kiss. "Oh God."

There's more than one way to outsmart a fox...

Foxy Lady

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A Cougar Falls Story

Trust Julia Easton to screw up Sheriff Ty Roderick's March Madness plans. The pixie-faced vixen might be the picture of feminine perfection, but she tests his innate sense of order to its limits. Weeks ago, he let his conscience turn down a proposition his body still burns to accept—then she vanished. Now he's in the middle of Nowhere, Washington, racing to rescue her from danger.

There's risk in leaving Cougar Falls, but it's the only way Julia can hope to save her sister from making the same mistake she almost made with Ty. Settling down and having kits is one thing, but it can't be done with a human, especially one from a hunting family. Unfortunately, her sister isn't budging, and the fiancé's brother won't take Julia's no for an answer, either.

When Ty comes riding to their rescue, Julia plans to use him and lose him. No way is she throwing herself at that alpha jerk's feet in gratitude. Then Ty gives her the answer her heart still longs for: he wants to spend the rest of his life making things right. Now if only she can find the courage to say yes.

Warning: Beware a foxy sheriff, a backwoods bad guy, a cunning vixen, sexy escapades in and out of the bedroom, and the return of stubborn male shifters who think they know everything.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Foxy Lady:

Ty didn't know whether to spank Julia or kiss her senseless. Just seeing her again aroused him in a way he was hard-pressed to explain. Her scent, the feel of her smooth skin under his hands, her soft kiss, all of it made him want to throw her down on the nearest bed and fuck her until he couldn't move. He wanted to tie her to him and make her admit she couldn't stop thinking about him. Because he sure as hell couldn't stop thinking about her.

Hearing that Neanderthal claim Julia had nearly ended Ned's life. It had taken a lot of discipline to remain still. Ty didn't like that loss of control. As town sheriff, he came into contact with conflict on a daily basis. He had a reputation as calm and collected. So why did Julia Easton tie him in knots?

At least the woman looked nervous. As she should.

"Well? I'm waiting," he said in a quiet voice, pleased when Julia and Gabby jumped.

The three sisters were exceptionally popular in the clan. Meghan was the youngest, and at the age where she needed to explore. No one had balked when she'd left town for college on the outside. Still, this Jason business would need some explaining.

Everyone liked Gabby, the most outgoing and genial of the three. She had a tawny complexion that suited her dark red hair, and a curvy frame where Meghan and Julia were leaner.

Slender, sexy and beautiful, Julia made him ache. She made him want to beg. He huffed. A Roderick didn't beg. Hell, at home he rejected sexual offers from women left and right. But Julia had never asked a thing from him, not until the sly vixen had propositioned him, drunk as a skunk. Now how the hell could he say yes to that and not have her hate him in the morning?

Meghan was the first to answer him. "Ty, uh, I'm, well..."

"Get on with it, Meghan." She really was cute. A younger version of Julia.

"The brat thinks she's in love," Julia said, her words laced with disgust. Her gaze met his before it skittered back to her sister.

"I *am* in love," Meghan retorted. "Just because you're turning into the neighborhood cat lady is no reason to be jealous I've found someone special."

Ty coughed to smother a laugh. "Cat lady?"

"You know, the old lady with no life who lives with like thirty cats for company."

"We like cats," Gabby defended, shooting Meghan a look that surprised Ty. She seemed genuinely annoyed.

Meghan flushed. "I'm just saying Julia blames me for having a sex life."

"I so did not need to hear that," Ty muttered.

Julia's eyes sparkled and her scent grew richer. When angry, the little spitfire turned him hard in a heartbeat. He casually crossed the room to stand behind an oversized chair to hide his erection. Talk about embarrassing, not to mention irritating. The vixen made him crazy like no one could.

"Okay, you want to talk about your sex life? Fine," Julia sneered. "Are you using birth control? Does Jason know what can happen when you go into heat? Is he prepared to help rear your litter?"

Fascinated, Ty watched the family interplay. He'd never seen Julia so impassioned. Normally she did her job with calm precision and couldn't be described as anything other than cool. But with Meghan, she acted like a virtual firecracker. A sultry redhead with a temper to boot. God, he wanted her.

Meghan stared from Julia to Ty and back again, her cheeks scarlet. "I am not going to talk about this in front of Ty."

Thank God.

She continued. "I'm going to call Jason to come get me." Tears filled her eyes. "He's the only one who understands me. The only one who *cares*." She sobbed and fled the room.

Everyone stared at the slammed door in silence.

After a moment, he asked, "You sure she didn't major in drama?"

Julia's lips curved.

Gabby choked on a laugh. "I'll go talk to her. You deal with him," she said to Julia, a knowing look in her eyes that made Julia blush. Gabby joined Meghan in the bedroom, leaving Julia and Ty alone together.

"Now it's just you and me, honey. Where should we start?"

Julia gnawed on her lower lip, and he wanted to kiss the sting away. She turned her direct amber-eyed gaze on him. "Why are you here?"

"You're welcome for saving you, by the way. Or would you rather I stepped aside so you and Ned can head down the aisle?" he asked dryly.

"Please. I can handle Ned."

"Oh?"

"Granted, he's an ass. But I know how to handle the type." The look she gave him heated his blood to boiling.

"I raced nearly two hundred miles on no sleep and shitty gas station food. I left the raptors in a frenzy, ready to rip out Sarah Duncan's feathers one by one. The cats are at the throats of the gray wolves again, the bears are losing their minds, and half our clan is in favor of instituting a new mating policy, whereby the silver foxes will soon have arranged marriages. I left all that behind to save you from Hunters."

"Hunters?" Julia blinked in confusion. "Rip out Sarah's feathers? Is she okay?"

He spoke through gritted teeth. "The Whitefeathers and Gerald have it all under control. Sarah's the one who told me you were having trouble with Hunters."

"What do the Whitefeathers have to do with this?"

"Julia, focus, would you? Why would Sarah think you were dealing with Hunters?" The thought of Julia being hunted down and killed had nearly stopped his heart before he'd managed to bear down and concentrate on finding her.

"Hunters? Where would she get that idea?" Her expression cleared. "Oh. Right. The last time we spoke I mentioned Jason's family's disgusting hobby of mounting dead things in their homes. She might have gotten the wrong impression."

"I'm not sure she did. Ned Williams seems pretty threatening." *And he likes you way too much for my liking.*

"He is, but he's nothing I can't handle." Now she sounded like the competent legal assistant he knew her to be. Sexy, unruffled, self-contained. "I'm sorry if you rushed out here on our behalf, but we're fine."

"Oh, right. I can see that. Some asshole just shot all of our tires. Your sister is involved with an outsider the clan knows nothing about, and you're getting married to Ned No-Neck Williams."

Julia pinched the bridge of her nose. "I didn't say we weren't having some problems, but it's a family matter. Not your concern, Ty."

He liked her saying his name. He'd like it a whole lot better if she'd cry it out as her body clenched around his in orgasm. "Oh, but it is my concern. Meghan's in some serious trouble. And it doesn't seem like she's going to drop this Jason anytime soon."

"I know." Julia sighed. "But we'll handle it."

“Yes, *we* will.” Ty made a sudden decision. Maybe he could fix a few issues at once. He had no transportation at the moment. Considering the “long line of Williamses” in Nowhere, he’d venture a guess he’d have a hard time finding spare tires for his truck in town.

Time to match wits with a sexy, conniving adversary. Satisfaction flooded him at the thought of tangling with Julia again. He really had missed her.

“What does ‘we will’ mean?” Suspicion made her voice husky.

“It means I’m here to fix a few things. But first things first.” He took a step closer, pleased when she licked her lips, nervous.

“Ty—”

He answered how he should have the first time she’d asked, four weeks ago. “Yes, Julia. Yes, I’ll take you home and make love to you until neither of us can walk.”

He kissed her before she could close her pretty mouth.



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